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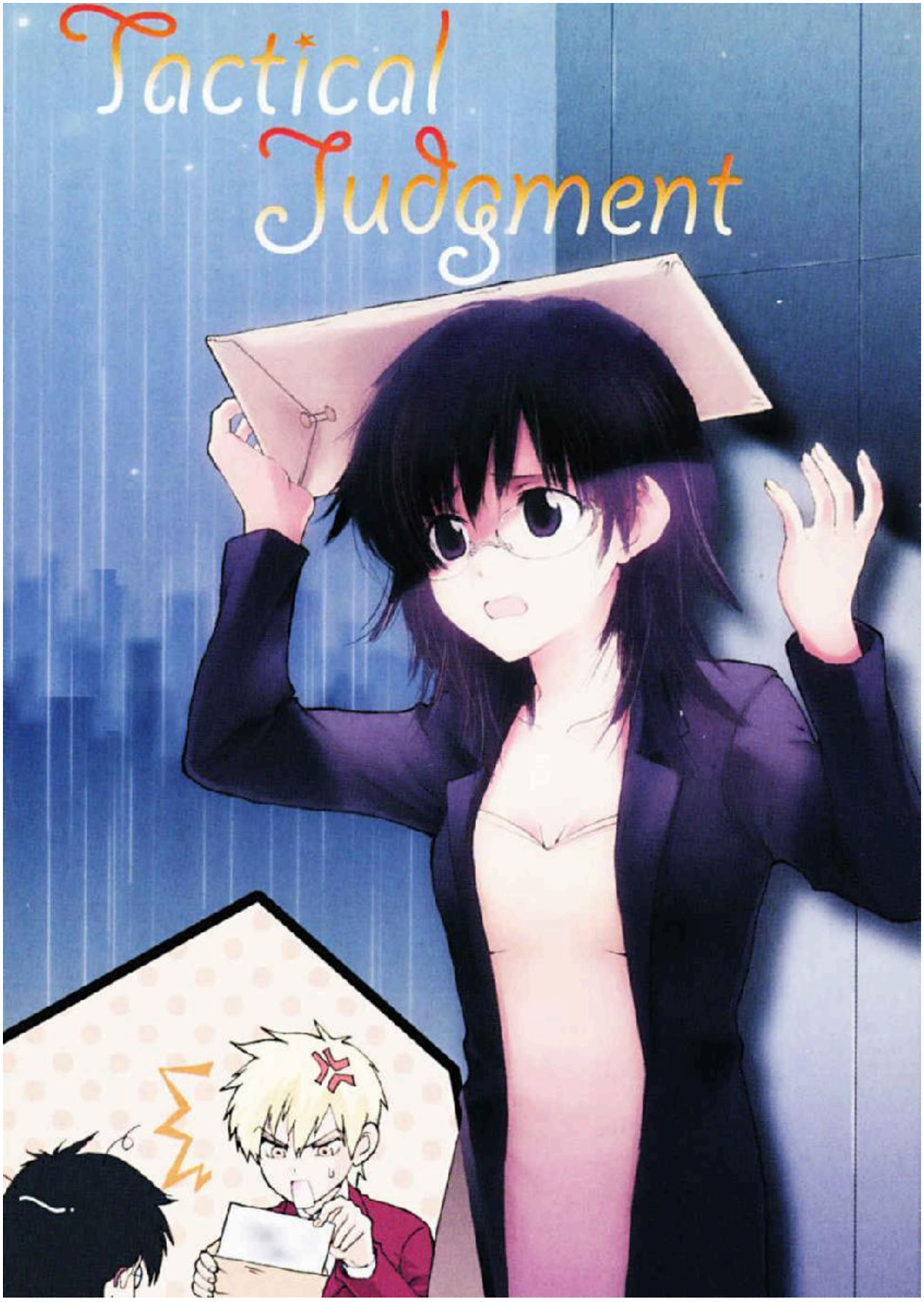
師走トオル

タクティカル ジャッジメント SS 3

Tactical Judgment

善行くんの弁護士養成講座

FUJIMI
MYSTERY
BUNKO


Tactical
Judgment

資本主義にまみれた世を正し
悪にふくらむ巨乳をくじく！
共産主義に純潔捧げる
美少女弁護人(自称)・皐月伊予!!
一日弁護士

「拝金主義のヘタレ弁護士！
毛沢東様の悪口いうと
バチがあたるわよ!!」
「んだとぉ!?　お前こそ
危険思想のクソガキだろうが？
もう一度、両親にしつけなおしてもらえっ!!」

Tactical Judgment Vol SS3: Good Ol' Zenko's Lawyer Training Course

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弁護士会主催の会食。
ガてつものの山鹿は手づかみで食べていた。
たまりかねて弁護士会副会長がたしなめる。
「山鹿、ナイフを使え」
仕方なく山鹿はナイフを手に立ち上がった。
「で、誰をやるんで？」

A dinner party hosted by the Bar Association.

The uncouth Yamashika was eating with his hands.

Unable to stand it any longer, the Vice-Chairman of the Bar Association admonished him.

"Yamashika, use a knife!"

Reluctantly, Yamashika picked up the knife and stood up.

"Okay, so who am I supposed to stab?"

善行くんの
弁護士養成講座

Good Ol' Zenko's Lawyer Training Course

The season is autumn.

The fields and mountains are dyed a beautiful red by the autumn leaves, and the oppressive heat of summer is nowhere to be found. Instead, there's even a slight chill in the air, such is the season.

But today, of all days, the weather is perfect with not a cloud in the sky. The warmth feels more like spring than the approaching winter, and even here at the Yamashika Law Office, we're wrapped in a sunny and pleasant atmosphere.

My name is Shinogi Kamatsuka. And no, whatever you do, don't read it as "Higashi-oni Isshaku-hassun." I'm currently a legal apprentice—that is to say, I'm training to become a lawyer, prosecutor, or someone else who "governs the law." Right now, I come to the Yamashika Law Office every day to gain practical experience in legal work, and I spend my days being chased by "work."

"Hmm. The sun sure is in a good mood today."

The warmth and tranquility of the day made me blurt out those words without thinking. Although I was confused by the "work" I was given at first, I've since grown used to it, enough that I can now say things like this with some degree of ease.

However—as usual, my mentor snaps me back to reality.

"I don't think that's the kind of line you say while wiping down the floors."

That's Mr. Yamashika, as always, sitting idly, reading the newspaper.

"...Can't I say whatever I want, whenever I want? It's such a warm day, like spring, and you don't feel a thing. That's what's strange, if you ask me."

"Will a rich emotional life bring in clients? Will it fill your stomach or help you win a case? Hmph. A lawyer only needs a sense of reality. Now get back to work."

"Ugh..."

He has no tact at all. This man is probably suffering from some kind of emotional deficiency disorder.

"Hey, Kamatsuka."

A girl's voice calls out, addressing me as "Kamatsuka" without any honorifics, even though I'm older than her. It's little Satsuki, who's sitting on the client sofa reading a book.

"What is it, Satsuki?"

"Come on, don't waste time chatting when you could be finishing up the cleaning. It's already three o'clock. Go buy something sweet."

"Ugh..."

Snow White, who was bullied by her stepmother, must have spent her days feeling exactly like I do.

"If anything, that's Cinderella, not Snow White."

"..."

I pretend not to hear Mr. Yamashika's tactless remark. How does he always know what I'm thinking?

"You're muttering to yourself, that's how."

"Wha—!? I-I was muttering?"

"Yeah, you've been mumbling for a while now."

"Ugh..."

I didn't even notice. Muttering to myself while cleaning makes me seem like some suspicious person.

"Anyone who comes in and out of this office isn't exactly a respectable person to begin with. Of course, I'm the exception."

Satsuki mercilessly rubs salt into the wound. I've been feeling lately, almost every day, that maybe I took the wrong path in life...

Ugh, I hate this kind of life.

They say that talking to yourself is something that mentally overwhelmed people tend to do. That's exactly me right now. I came here to gain practical experience as a lawyer. So why do I have to spend every day cleaning and running errands? ...It feels like I say this same thing every day.

They say even a broken watch is right twice a day—or rather, it would be a waste to let Mr. Yamashika's skills break. Despite his usual uselessness, he's a well-known lawyer across the country. As a lawyer, there are a few things about him that I can respect.

I make up my mind, throw down the cleaning tools, and stand right in front of Mr. Yamashika.

"Mr. Yamashika!"

"Huh? What is it, Isshaku?"

"It's Kamatsuka, sir..."

Under Mr. Yamashika's sharp gaze, I feel my resolve faltering.

But I can't run away now. If I do, it'll just be the same old cycle all over again.

"Sir! I can't take it anymore! I came here to gain practical experience as a lawyer, not to do cleaning and errands—"

Before I could finish, Mr. Yamashika let out a sigh, clearly fed up.

"Ah, I get it, I really do. I figured it was about time for you to start complaining about this again."

"Oh, that's right, it's Thursday, isn't it?"

Ugh, what's with their reactions? It's like they expect me to protest on a regular schedule.

"What you want is some actual lawyer work instead of these chores, right?"

"To put it simply, yes."

Ugh, he's reading me like a book. Mr. Yamashika, looking completely uninterested, crosses his arms behind his head.

"Unfortunately for you, I don't have a single case on my plate right now. There's no legal work to give you, so what do you expect me to do?"

"Ugh..."

He's right. This law office doesn't have many clients, and we hardly get any visitors. In fact, for the past several days, all Mr. Yamashika's done is read the newspaper.

But even so, I refuse to keep cleaning and running errands. I can't back down now.

“Well then, sir. Could you at least tell me something useful for my future as a lawyer?”

“Whoa, you’re asking Zenko for something useful? Kamatsuka, are you serious?”

Satsuki’s reasonable remark is something I choose to ignore for now.

“Shut up, brat. So, you want some kind of wisdom or experience, huh? Well, that’s better than handing you a job and watching you screw it up. Fine. What kind of story do you want to hear?”

“Uh... well, anything you think would be useful, sir.”

“Be specific. Do you really think what’s useful to me and what’s useful to you are the same thing?”

“T-That’s true, but...”

He’s right. If he told me something like "how to fabricate evidence without getting caught," I’d be at a loss.

But then, what should I ask for? I’ve already had some experience with criminal trials. And this man hardly ever takes on civil cases...

“Hurry up and decide. I’m not free, you know. You’ve got five seconds. Four, three, two...”

“Ugh! Uh, um, well... how about a story related to spring!?”

“...Huh?”

Mr. Yamashika gives me a completely blank stare. Yeah, I don’t even know why I mentioned spring. Maybe my mind was influenced by the spring-like weather.

“You’ve got some strange ideas. A story about spring? What does spring have to do with being a lawyer?”

“Well, um, you know... spring is a time for new beginnings, like starting a new job! So, perhaps you could tell me about your first experiences as a lawyer?”

“Hm. I see.”

With that, Mr. Yamashika seems to understand. It was just a spur-of-the-moment excuse, but it seems to have been persuasive enough.

Yes, spring is the season of new beginnings. I’m genuinely curious about what Mr. Yamashika’s early experiences as a lawyer were like.

After thinking for a moment, he speaks.

“Spring, huh. Well, I guess I could tell you a story about flowers?”

“Pfft! Flowers?” Satsuki bursts out laughing. “The great Zenko talking about flowers? That’s so not like you!”

“I wasn’t talking to you, brat. Shut up. So, Kamatsuka, how about it? Is that good enough for you?”

“Yes, please! I’d love to hear it!”

After all, this is a personal story from Mr. Yamashika. I have no complaints. It is surprising to hear him mention flowers, though.

Mr. Yamashika leans back in his chair, then begins to 'narrate'—I mean, tell his story.

“It happened last spring.

Yes, it was on a day when the flowers were blooming like crazy. Out of the blue, the local bar association called me in—”

◆◆◆◆

I knocked on the door of the room with a loud *bang, bang, bang*.

"...Who is it?"

"It's me."

"...I figured. Come in."

After this brief exchange, I pushed open the door.

"I came because I was called. What do you want?"

I tried to sound as polite as possible, but failed, and ended up speaking bluntly as usual.

I knew I was being rude, but the person who called me in clearly hadn’t expected any formalities from me either, so there was no reprimand.

"I’ve got a job for you."

That man—Takeda Hiroto—said. He was the vice president of the local bar association, one of those "obviously smart" types, a real asshole with glasses.

"Any job coming from you must be a real peach."

"Oh, it’s wonderful, all right. Listen, there’s a private school called Yamabuki High, about three stations away from here."

"And?"

"You were once a student yourself, so I’m sure you know. By the time students reach their second year of high school, they start thinking seriously about their future. At Yamabuki High, they bring in professionals like rookie doctors, pilots, and others to give talks, as references for students choosing their career paths.

So, Yamashika, I’m sure you’ve figured it out by now, right? Ordinarily, I wouldn’t dream of giving this job to someone like you, not in a million years, but since there’s no one else suitable, I have no choice. As the representative lawyer, you’re to be at that high school by 4 PM and give a lecture on what it means to be a lawyer. Got it?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I immediately protested.

"First, you call me in out of nowhere and now this? Why me? There must be plenty of lawyers who’d love to give that kind of talk, right?"

'For example, *you*', I thought.

"Hmph, who would willingly let someone like you give a lecture? If we did that, people would start confusing lawyers with auctioneers.

Unfortunately, the school specifically requested a young, newly-minted lawyer. And out of all the lawyers in this bar association, the youngest, most available, and the one who hasn’t done any real service work yet is you."

"I see. Well, it’s true that the rest of the lawyers are all middle-aged men. They’d be too out of touch to talk to high school students."

My sarcasm didn’t seem to land.

"I’m glad you understand. Now that you’re convinced, hurry up and get going. And don’t hang around here any longer."

"Just to clarify, I don’t get any say in this?"

"Don’t tell me you think you actually have a choice in the matter?"

"Normally, I would."

"Then let me put it this way: you’re not normal, so you don’t get a choice. Any problems with that?"

"I suppose I should take that as a compliment, huh? After all, there’s no lawyer as *brilliant* as me."

"Hmph, a lawyer who’s thrown away all sense of ethics, social decency, and shame... I envy that level of optimism. It’s almost admirable."

A lawyer with no filter. It’s people like him who give the legal profession a bad name.

"So, to be clear, I have no right to refuse?"

"You seem to be misunderstanding something. If you really can’t stand it, I’m a generous man, I’ll try to find someone else. But in that case, you’ll have to leave your lawyer’s badge here on my desk."

"..."

In short, it was a done deal.

I wasn’t happy about it, but there was no way I was going to give up the lawyer’s badge I’d only recently obtained.

"Fine, fine! I’ll go, okay? But if I’m giving a lecture, I need to at least prepare for it. Why didn’t you give me more notice?"

"What are you being modest about? You’re the *brilliant* lawyer who once delivered a closing argument without even a single sheet of notes. You don’t need time to prepare.

Now, enough idle chatter. Get out of here. I don’t want to see that unpleasant face of yours any longer. Just looking at it makes me genuinely uncomfortable. ...No, seriously, I’m getting angry. Why are you still standing there? I’ve got nothing more to say to you. Damn it, how long do you plan on staying there? I said get out of my sight! Damn it, I can’t take this anymore! Your existence alone is an eyesore. Just disappear! From this world! Right now! Go! Go, go!"

"...This is absurd."

Why did I have to be told off like that? What did I ever do to him?

Oh, right. Many things, actually.

Well, there's no point in dragging this out any longer. I could hang around just to piss him off, but I don't want to sit through more of his insults. Reluctantly, I shrugged and left that annoying four-eyed monkey's office.

After that, I got on the train without any fuss. Of course, I was heading to Yamabuki High to give that lecture.

Just to clarify, so there's no misunderstanding—

The reason I stopped protesting and obediently went along with Takeda's request wasn't because I was lured by the words "high school", implying "high school girls." Not at all. Definitely, absolutely not.

In the first place, I don't even like kids around high school age.

And just to be clear, I'm not saying I dislike high school girls. It's just that dealing with immature brats is a real pain, and I'd prefer to avoid the hassle. But, just to be clear again, it's not that I dislike high school girls, and considering their future potential, it might not be a bad idea to get to know them better... but just to be clear, I didn't take this job because I wanted to deepen my relationships with high school girls. It's simply a reflection of my desire to serve society as a lawyer. Now then, what the hell am I even saying?

But—my worries turned out to be completely unfounded.

As soon as I arrived at the school gate, I muttered to myself.

"...I've been tricked."

The school was located beyond a row of meticulously maintained ginkgo trees.

It was clearly a prestigious private school, with a large campus and beautiful buildings.

The biggest problem was the name engraved on the gate.

Yamabuki High. That was the name I'd been told. However, two very crucial words had been left out.

The school's full name was *Yamabuki High Boys' Academy*—

It was an all-boys school.

At this point, about 30% of my motivation instantly drained away.

But then, I discovered something that drained my motivation even more.

This school was clearly sports-oriented.

I glanced around and saw massive students in blazers and ties, walking in and out of the gate.

"Hey, you there, junior!!"

"Yes, sir! What is it, seniori!!"

"Your tie is crooked! Fix your appearance, damn it!!"

"Y-Yes, sir! I'm sorry, sir!!"

"..."

I felt dizzy for a moment. What the hell kind of school is this?

Maybe there's another Yamabuki High somewhere, and I just took a wrong turn, or maybe I've somehow slipped into another dimension. I seriously started to think that. No, I *wanted* to think that.

But the address Takeda the Four-Eyed Monkey gave me was definitely this place, and no matter how much I looked around, there was no sign of any dimensional rift. I had no choice but to accept that this was reality.

I briefly considered turning around and going home, but if I abandoned my mission now, that asshole Takeda would seize the opportunity to revoke my lawyer's license with glee.

Resigned, I decided I had to enter. But when I looked from the school gate toward the field, I was struck by another headache.

The boys, overflowing with energy, were sweating as they enthusiastically threw themselves into various sports. Just watching them made me feel like I could smell the sweat.

"YAMA HIIIIIGH... FIIIIIIIGHT!!"

"WOOOOOOOHHHH!!"

"..."

Correction. Even without looking, just listening to them made me feel the stink of sweat. This is exactly why I hate sports-oriented boys' schools so much. ...Not that I'd prefer a liberal arts boys' school either, though.

And then, it happened.

"Are you, by any chance, Mr. Yamashikaaaaaaa!?"

Even I couldn't help but flinch at the sheer volume of the voice.

I turned toward the sound to find a large male student, also wearing glasses, standing completely still for some reason.

"Y-Yeah, that's me."

"We've been waiting for youuuuu! My name is Minegishiiii! I will guide you inside the school nowww!"

"...Y-Yeah, thanks."

I had an overwhelming urge to turn around and leave, thinking they had the wrong guy, but I remembered how much I wanted to keep my lawyer's license, so I had no choice but to follow him.

Inwardly sighing in despair, I followed the glasses-wearing student through the school gate. The moment I stepped onto the sports field, I would like to think it was just my imagination, but I felt the heat and the smell of sweat.

At that moment, a few large students, who were on their way home, noticed us.

"Senior Minegishi! Yooooooo!"

...And just like a karate practitioner, they spread their arms wide and struck a firm pose.

"Yo! Watch out for cars on your way back!"

The student who called himself Minegishi responded with the same gesture. I had to suppress the urge to shout, "Don't you guys think there's something wrong with this?"

As we continued toward the school building, I was greeted with countless "Yo!" greetings, filled with a rough, masculine energy.

I couldn't help but wish this were a co-ed school. I mean, I'm a guy, too. Of course, I'd rather be greeted by soft-spoken female students saying "Good day" than by these sweaty boys shouting "Yo!" at me.

Reality never works out the way you want it to—I strongly felt that this was a lesson in life.

"So, what do you think of the school?"

Once we entered the building after crossing the field, Minegishi asked me that.

"Uh, well, it's certainly... unique."

"Right? Right? I truly believe that there's no other school in Japan as wonderful as ours."

We definitely don't need two of these schools.

Even though I didn't ask, Minegishi started talking all about this dreadful school.

"At our school, we focus on both academics and sports. Every student here is required to join both a sports club and a cultural club."

"C-Cultural? Those hulking guys? You've got to be kidding me."

"Excuse me? Did you say something?"

"...No, I was just wondering if you have a chess club. When it comes to cultural clubs for guys, it's gotta be chess, right?"

"Ah. Yes, we do have a chess club, of course, but the most popular ones are the literary club, the handicrafts club, and above all, the tea ceremony club."

Those hulking guys... doing handicrafts...?

...I started feeling nauseous.

"What do you think? If you're interested, I could show you around a bit?"

"N-No, I'm fine. We're running short on time, after all."

"No need to rush, we've still got time. It won't take long—the tea ceremony club's room is right over there. Look, it's just over there."

...What I did at that moment is something I would regret for a long time. It was probably instinct. When someone says, "Look, it's right there," everyone naturally looks in that direction.

...In that room, there were about a dozen high school boys, all around 17 years old, dressed in traditional Japanese clothing, quietly drinking tea.

Just describing it like this, it might sound like a serene and refined scene.

However, these high school boys were, as expected, all rugged, burly guys. It didn't look like a tea ceremony club; it looked more like a yakuza initiation ritual. It was an absolutely ridiculous sight. I mean, in the sense that it was beyond anything I could have imagined.

"How about it? They're all quite skilled, aren't they? If you'd like, I could show you the handicrafts club room next."

"No, no, please spare me. I'm begging you."

"Ah, I see. Well then, let's head to the audiovisual room."

Whether he understood my desperation or not, Minegishi didn't subject me to further torment.

I just hope that the disturbing scene I witnessed earlier doesn't come back to haunt me in my dreams.

◆

"Alright, so the person we've invited today is Mr. Zenko Yamashika, who became a lawyer at the tender age of 20-something! Everyone, make sure not to show any disrespect!"

The teacher, who introduced himself as Ishizuka, introduced me like that.

He was middle-aged, with a large frame, dressed in a tracksuit. Another prime example of a sports-obsessed type. I couldn't help but find it strange that he wasn't carrying a bamboo sword.

The students in the classroom were, as expected, just as burly and rugged as the ones I saw outside. They were clearly the athletic type, and the air in the room had the same rough, masculine energy.

Feeling half-exasperated, I offered a brief greeting out of a sense of obligation.

"I'm Yamashika. Nice to meet you."

The very next moment—

"AWWRRIIIIGHT!!!"

The students roared in unison, shaking the classroom. This school was fundamentally broken in some way—or rather, I didn't even want to think about it anymore.

"So, Mr. Yamashika! Can we start nowww!?"

Ishizuka barked at me. ...Well, he probably thought he was asking me politely.

"...Alright. Let's get started."

By this point, I was starting to feel pretty reckless myself.

I couldn't deal with these guys any longer. Whatever complaints I might get later, I didn't care. I'd just wing it and get it over with as quickly as possible. That's the decision I'd made.

"Now then—"

I placed both hands on the teacher's desk and leaned forward slightly, looking at the crowd of burly boys.

"Any questions?"

With a loud crash, several students fell out of their chairs. It was almost as if they were trying to imitate a comedic bit, with how perfectly timed their reactions were.

"U-Um, Mr. Yamashika," Ishizuka said hesitantly, his voice not matching his large frame. "You're starting with a Q&A session?"

"Yeah. This was all kind of last-minute, so honestly, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be lecturing about. I'd rather hear what you guys want to know."

"I-I see. So that's how it is."

Ishizuka cleared his throat with a clearly exaggerated cough, then surveyed the class.

"So, that’s the deal! Anyone got any questions for him!?"

I had a faint glimmer of hope.

Ordinary high school students typically don’t rush to ask questions in this kind of situation. I can’t explain why exactly, but that’s just how high schoolers are. If things played out that way, I’d be done for the day and could head home quickly.

But—my hopes were easily crushed. These students were all overly enthusiastic, and several of them shot their hands up immediately.

Well, if I didn’t engage with them at least a little, I’d probably hear no end of it from Takeda later. Reluctantly, I pointed at a random student.

"Alright... you, over there."

"Yes! My name is Higashiyama! My first question is this: how do you become a lawyer!?"

Wow, that’s about as standard as it gets. Then again, considering the situation, I should probably count myself lucky that he didn’t ask something like, "What’s your recommended protein supplement?"

Anyway, since I’d been asked a proper question, I had no choice but to answer it properly.

"Well, let’s see. To become a lawyer, first and foremost, you have to pass the bar exam. After passing the exam, you’ll undergo two years of professional training to become a lawyer. Once that’s completed, you register with a local bar association, and only then can you officially call yourself a lawyer."

"I-Is it really that difficult!?"

Is this a military academy or something?

"Of course. The bar exam is said to be the hardest exam in Japan. It’s not something you can pass easily. However, there are no age or academic restrictions to take the bar exam, so you have as many chances as you want. In short, even you guys here have the potential to become lawyers. Though the pass rate is incredibly low."

"I see, that was very informative! Thank you so much!"

"Alright, does anyone else have a question?"

Another student immediately raised his hand.

"Alright, you next."

"Yes! My name is Yamano! I remember hearing that you need to graduate from law school to take the bar exam! Is that true!?"

Phew. Another reasonable question. It seems that while the school culture might be out of whack, they at least have some common sense. For the first time since I came to this school, I felt a bit relieved.

"That's a misunderstanding. The bar exam has two stages: the preliminary exam and the main exam. The preliminary exam covers general education and foreign languages, while the main exam focuses on law.

Now, regarding the preliminary exam, there's a rule that if you've completed your university's general education courses, you'll be exempt from it. So yeah, it's true that having a university degree makes the bar exam a bit easier."

Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to become a lawyer in my early twenties.

"I understand now! Thank you very much!"

"Alright, next. Let's see... you over there."

"Yes! My name is Imai! Why did you decide to become a lawyer, Mr. Yamashika!?"

Well, obviously because it's a job that guarantees I'll never be broke. On top of that, I get to pick fights whenever I want, and just handing over my business card makes anyone cower. People call me 'Mister' without me even doing anything. Becoming a lawyer is a great gig, and once you've had it, you'll never want to quit.

...I held back the urge to say all that. No matter how true it is, it's a bit too dangerous to be telling this to minors. Instead, I said:

"Well, of course, it's because I wanted to protect people's fundamental human rights and personally uphold social justice."

Ugh, I feel like I'm getting goosebumps just saying that.

However, the students, who seemed to have no sense of skepticism, were now looking at me with a gaze that clearly included a hint of respect. Honestly, it'd be much better for these kids if I told them, 'Don't take everything adults say at face value.'

Anyway, this questioner seemed satisfied, so I pointed to the next one.

"My name is Sakanouchi! What kind of work do lawyers do on a regular basis?"

Well, it's an easy job. You just kill time reading the newspaper, waiting for an interesting case like a murder to come along. When you need money, you just offer some legal consultations here and there.

...If I gave a lecture like that, I'd probably get my lawyer badge taken away.

"There are mainly three things lawyers do on a daily basis.

First, of course, there's court-related stuff. Besides going to court and making arguments, there are also things like negotiating settlements, preserving evidence, or overseeing property seizures. That kind of thing."

I've hardly done any of that myself, though.

"Then there's consulting with clients who come to the office—that's another key part of the job. And the rest is just boring paperwork. No matter what aspect of the job, it's always paperwork first in this field.

And if you're a lawyer running your own firm, you also have to think about keeping the office going and paying your staff. So yeah, it's definitely busy work. Though, it's fulfilling."

That's a lie, by the way.

"I see, that was very informative!"

"Alright, next... you over there."

"Yes! My name is Kogo! This might be a bit awkward to ask, but...!"

"Go ahead. Ask me anything."

Since I'm going to lie through my teeth anyway.

"I've heard that you specialize in criminal trials, Mr. Yamashika. If your client claimed they were innocent, but you found out they were actually guilty, what would you do!?"

Are you stupid? If the client says they're innocent, the defense attorney's job is to follow that claim. Afterward, you just use whatever method you can to get them acquitted, so your own career doesn't take a hit.

"In that case, of course—" I grinned as I answered, "I would follow social ethics and urge the client to turn themselves in. No lawyer would ever force an acquittal when the client is actually guilty."

That's a lie, by the way.

"I-I see! Then, Mr. Yamashika, when you take on a case, what do you prioritize?"

Hmm. There's no need to lie about this.

"First and foremost, I make sure to listen to the client's story.

Listen carefully, this is important to remember. People will always tell you what's most convenient for them. Even clients. So, the first thing you need to do is see through those lies. That's why when I take on a defense case, I always start by doubting everything the client says."

"Ooooh," a collective voice of admiration echoed through the classroom.

And so, I continued answering the barrage of questions one by one. Even though most of my answers were complete lies. But despite that, the respect in their gazes toward me kept growing. Not that I was happy to be respected by these sweaty, burly guys, though.

"Any other questions?"

By that point, there were no more hands in the air.

In other words, this crappy job was finally coming to an end.

—Or so I thought, but at that moment, I heard shouting from outside the classroom.

"Don't screw with me! You started this fight in the first place!"

"You're the one who's wrong! You should pay more attention to the people around you!"

It seemed a fight had broken out between the students. Oddly enough, I felt a little relieved. Even in a school as weird as this, fights between students are still a thing.

"M-Mr. Ishizuka!"

The door to the classroom swung open, and a student rushed in.

"Hey! Can’t you see we’re in the middle of a lecture!? Deal with it later!"

"I-I’m sorry! But there are some guys about to start a fight, and we can’t stop them on our own!"

"Tch..."

Ishizuka clicked his tongue, clearly annoyed.

"My apologies, Mr. Yamashika. I’m sorry that your lecture has been interrupted by something like this. Please wait a moment while I bring in the students causing trouble and have them apologize."

"No, no, don’t worry about it. Fights between high schoolers are pretty normal."

"I appreciate your understanding, but our school has its own way of doing things. If someone causes trouble, we make sure they take responsibility. That’s how we do things here. Please wait just a moment."

I couldn’t care less about their troublesome methods. I just wanted them to let me leave this sweaty school already.

...Of course, my silent plea didn’t reach anyone, and Ishizuka quickly left the classroom.

Soon after, Ishizuka returned, but this time, he had a student with him.

The student was tall and had a particularly nasty look in his eyes. The school probably had strict rules, as his hair wasn’t dyed, but he still looked like the stereotypical delinquent.

"My apologies, Mr. Yamashika. It seems there were two students involved in the fight, but unfortunately, the other one seems to have gone home already. So, we only have this one here."

"I see. I see."

"I’m truly sorry. Now, Umioka, apologize to the teacher!"

But the student named Umioka didn’t immediately bow his head.

"Don’t mess with me! Why should I be the only one to apologize!? It wasn’t even my fault that the fight started! It was Yamahara’s fault!"

"I understand, I do. I’m sure you have your side of the story. But the basic rule is that both sides are at fault in a fight. So just apologize!"

"Now, now, Mr. Ishizuka," I interjected. Well, I had to intervene.

Because I am a lawyer who has garnered the respect of all the students here. If I were to make Umioka apologize without hearing his side of the story, despite his protests, the wall of trust I've built up with all my carefully spun lies would crumble. Even though this is a trivial job, having come this far, I want to finish it cleanly, without anyone having any complaints.

"Sure, it's true that both parties are at fault in a fight, but demanding an apology without hearing his side of the story is a bit unreasonable. Why don't we let the student explain the situation first?"

"Hmm, I see. When you put it that way, Mr. Yamashika, it's quite convincing.

Alright, Umioka, explain how the fight started."

The student named Umioka, perhaps because he no longer had to apologize without being heard, began to speak, his tone slightly calmer.

"...It was yesterday evening, when I was about to head home from school.

I was just waiting in line for the train at the station. Then, out of nowhere, Yamahara cut in front of me.

Anyone would feel pissed if that happened to them, right? Same with me. But you know, there were people around, so I stayed quiet for the time being.

But, I didn't want to just let it go, so when I ran into him earlier, I told him not to cut in line. Then, Yamahara suddenly got mad and shoved me, so I got heated, and—"

"And that's how the fight started?"

"...Yeah."

I thought to myself, what a peaceful reason.

It's not like someone tricked him out of money, or stole his girlfriend, or stabbed him, or framed him as a guarantor without his knowledge. It was just someone cutting in line. No matter how unique this school might be, in the end, it's still just a regular high school—a peaceful place.

"...Hmm, well, it does seem like Yamahara was in the wrong," Ishizuka said, crossing his arms and thinking it over. "Mr. Yamashika, what do you think we should do?"

At this point, I couldn't just pretend not to know.

Instead of answering Ishizuka, I turned to the students.

"Alright, let’s use this as a teaching opportunity. Since we’re here, I’ll ask everyone a question. Listen carefully, I’ll be direct. Did everyone understand Umioka’s story just now? If you didn’t, raise your hand."

No one raised their hand.

"Alright, next question. After hearing Umioka’s story, who thinks he’s the one in the wrong? Raise your hand."

Again, no one raised their hand.

"Then, who thinks the one who cut in line, Yamahara, is at fault?"

One by one, hands started going up, and soon, nearly everyone had raised their hand.

"I see. Based on Umioka’s story, it certainly seems like the fault lies with Yamahara for cutting in line.

But, did everyone already forget what I said earlier? What did I say? I told you that people always tell lies that are convenient for themselves, didn’t I? No offense, Umioka, but there’s no need to believe everything you say."

"W-What are you saying!?" Umioka, of course, was furious. "I didn’t lie! Everything I said was the truth!"

"Of course, that’s what you’d say. But since we can’t hear from the other party, Yamahara, right now, the most dangerous thing we could do is believe your story unconditionally. ...Though, I’m sure you’re not going to accept that, are you?"

"O-Of course not!"

"Well then, I’d like to propose something."

"...P-Propose? What do you mean by that?"

"I want to ask you a few questions to determine whether you’re telling the truth. You don’t mind, do you?"

Umioka hesitated, seemingly unsure of my intentions, but eventually answered gruffly.

"Tch, do whatever you want."

"Alright then, let’s begin. First, you said you were at the station in the evening, right?"

"Yeah."

"And you were waiting for the train when Yamahara suddenly cut in front of you?"

"That’s right."

"Let’s clarify the situation bit by bit. You said it was in the evening, but what time exactly?"

"...Around 6:30 PM."

"Got it, 6:30. At that time, the station would’ve been crowded, right?"

"Of course."

"As expected. Alright, next, can you describe where exactly you were standing in line?"

"...I mean, I was just standing in line like normal. There’s a mark on the station floor where the train doors open, right? I was standing there, that’s all."

"I see, so you were in line for the train. How many people were in that line with you?"

"...There were a lot of people."

"Be more specific."

"About six people... I think."

"I see, so there was a decent line. And where were you in that line? At the front, the middle, or the back?"

"...Pretty far toward the back."

"So, you weren’t at the very end?"

Umioka hesitated for a moment.

"I was probably second from the back."

"And while you were standing there, Yamahara suddenly cut in front of you, right?"

"Yeah."

"I’ll ask again: the station was really crowded at that time, right?"

"Yeah."

"How exactly did Yamahara cut in?"

"H-How? He just slipped right in front of me like it was nothing."

Aha, here we go—he's starting to slip up.

"I see, the situation is becoming clearer. But if we accept your story as is, there's still one thing that doesn't quite add up."

"W-What do you mean?"

"When you were in line, there was enough space in front of you for someone to slip in, wasn't there?"

"Uh—"

Umioka's face faltered.

"Don't 'uh' me. You said Yamahara slipped in front of you, didn't you? And he didn't push you aside to do it. That means there was enough space in front of you for someone to fit.

So, think about it. It was 6:30 PM, a busy time at the station, when people were expected to line up properly.

If you saw someone leaving enough space in the line for one person to fit, what would you think? Wouldn't you think something like, 'They should line up properly'?"

"W-Well—"

At that point, Umioka averted his eyes to the left, as if trying to escape my gaze, and said,

"N-No, I just remembered. I was definitely standing in line properly. There wasn't any gap. Yamahara just shoved his way in, yeah, I remember it clearly now."

Such a blatantly forced excuse. Well, it's very high school-like, I suppose.

Normally, when someone tries to brazen it out like that, it's a pain to refute, but since this isn't a trial, I'm not without options.

"Sorry, but that's a lie."

"I-It’s not a lie!"

"No, it is. Because, Umioka, just now your gaze shifted to the left."

"W-What do my eyes have to do with lying!?"

"Remember this: when people are recalling something, their gaze moves to the right. When they’re making something up, it moves to the left. It’s said that the visual cortex and the language center in the left hemisphere of the brain work together. In other words, since you looked to the left, what you said was made up on the spot."

A murmur went through the classroom.

For the record, I wasn’t lying. Apparently, that’s actually true from a human behavioral science perspective.

But of course, plenty of people can lie while looking you straight in the eye, and if the person being questioned knows this fact, they can easily manipulate it. So, it’s never been useful in court.

"Well, that settles it," I continued. "Sure, cutting in front of someone in line isn’t exactly praiseworthy. But, at 6:30 PM, a time when the station is packed, you also bear some responsibility for leaving an unnecessary gap in the line. Isn’t that right?"

"..."

"In this case, it seems like calling it a draw is the most appropriate. Umioka, do you still have any complaints?"

"..."

Umioka stayed silent for a while, but finally, as if he had resigned himself, he let out a big sigh.

"...Yeah, you’re right. Maybe I was at fault too."

At that moment.

The gaze of respect directed toward me reached its peak.

And with this exchange, I was finally released from this stifling school.

◆

The next day, after finishing that suffocating job.

While I was killing time at the office, sipping tea, I got a call from Takeda.

"Hey, Yamashika! What the hell kind of lecture did you give!?"

Right off the bat, he was in full-on yelling mode.

"Nothing special. I just gave a lecture on what it means to be a lawyer. Did someone complain?"

At the very least, I don't remember saying anything that would be bad for their education.

But Takeda, still sounding highly dissatisfied, said:

"...No, quite the opposite. Apparently, the students loved it. They said it was a fantastic talk. I'll ask again—what the hell kind of lecture did you give?"

I grinned.

"Like I said, I just gave a lecture on what it means to be a lawyer. I guess I've got a knack for teaching."

"...Hmph. Well, fine. I'll give you credit for not tarnishing the reputation of the legal profession, at least."

"Oh, well, thank you."

"And this is a message from the school. If possible, they'd love to have you come back and give another lecture."

"Oh really, is that so."

I'd never want to set foot in that school again, but I couldn't help feeling a little pleased.

However, that feeling lasted only until Takeda's next words.

"Rejoice. Apparently, a bunch of students are saying they've fallen for 'Big Brother Yamashika.'"

"Pfffffftt!?"

...The green tea I'd been drinking sprayed out, forming a rainbow in the office.

◆◆◆◆

"...And that’s the story."

Mr. Yamashika finished speaking, wearing a somewhat chilly expression.

"...I see."

It was hard to tell if this was useful or not, but it was definitely different from the story I had expected.

I mean, wasn’t this supposed to be a story related to flowers or something?

"Wow, that’s a horrifying tale."

Unlike me, who couldn’t come up with a suitable comment at the moment, Satsuki gave her candid thoughts right away.

"So, what? Did you end up going back as 'Big Brother' to give another lecture?"

"...I don’t want to talk about that."

For some reason, my mentor’s face turned pale, as if recalling a bad memory. It was rare to see him change his expression, let alone so drastically.

"Um, sir, may I ask one question?"

I couldn’t stay silent forever, so I gathered my courage and decided to ask about the question that had been bothering me.

"What is it, Isshaku?"

"About that story... How exactly is it related to flowers?"

"Oh, that."

He leaned back in his chair and, with a distant look in his eyes, continued.

"When I was giving that lecture, every time I looked at the classroom, packed with those sweaty guys, I kept thinking to myself.

It’s spring, for crying out loud, and yet this job isn't flowery at all, is it?"

"...Is that really how you’re going to end this?"

(Good Ol' Zenko's Lawyer Training Course -- End)

はじめてのさいばん
エピソード2
善行の逆襲

My First Trial Episode 2: Zenko Strikes Back

That day was just an ordinary weekday, with nothing special about it at all.

As usual, I was being tormented by Mr. Yamashika.

"Hey, Isshaku!"

Mr. Yamashika, with his feet up on the desk like a delinquent student, called out to me.

As I was wiping the floor with a rag, I immediately protested.

"My name isn't Isshaku, it's Kamatsuka!"

"Quit being so damn noisy. When I call you Isshaku, you’re Isshaku."

"I-I have the right to be called by my proper name! This is harassment, and I'll sue you for it!"

"Oh ho?"

Mr. Yamashika curled his lips into a grin, like a carnivorous beast that had just found its prey.

"A little softie like you, taking me to court? Well, that might be a good experience for you, but whatever verdict comes out, don’t regret it later."

"Ugh."

I remembered that this guy was a ridiculous lawyer who could twist any and all facts.

If I really took this to court, I could end up with a ruling like, "Since the name Kamatsuka is difficult for anyone to read, the plaintiff should accept being called Isshaku in the interest of public convenience."

"I understand, Isshaku is fine..."

"See? You should’ve just nodded obediently from the start."

"Ugh... So, what do you need from me?"

"...Hmm."

For some reason, Mr. Yamashika fell silent. After a few seconds of awkward silence, he suddenly said:

"You made me forget what I was going to say because you were talking back!"

"How is that my fault!?"

"Ahhh, shut up! I said no talking back! If you've got time to flap your gums, then move your hands! How long are you going to keep wiping the floor? Hurry up and finish, and go buy my lunch!"

"Ughhh, now he's snapping at me..."

"What was that!?"

"Eek! N-Nothing! Everything's my fault..."

I'm just like Cinderella, being bullied by her wicked stepmother. My daily life is unbearably harsh.

But, the process of learning practical skills under a lawyer is something I absolutely have to endure if I want to become a lawyer myself. All the lawyers in the world went through this kind of harsh training, so I have no choice but to bear it. Surely, my fellow trainees are also spending their days cleaning offices and running errands, just waiting for the days to pass one by one.

"Hey, you've stopped moving! Get to work!"

"Ughhh..."

Still, I can't shake the feeling that there isn't another lawyer as tyrannical as this one in the whole world. The worst thought crosses my mind—that I might be the only trainee being treated this way—and the little bit of energy I'd regained quickly drains away.

If only someone could tell me. What was it that gave Cinderella hope and helped her endure her harsh days, when she had no hope for tomorrow and spent every day being cruelly bossed around?

But then.

On this very day, a pumpkin carriage arrived to rescue this unfortunate Cinderella.

The phone rang.

Mr. Yamashika clicked his tongue in annoyance, and with a look of utter exasperation, picked up the receiver.

"This is the Yamashika Law Office. ...Ugh."

He made a face like he'd just bitten into a cockroach. It seemed to be someone he really didn't like.

"...It's you again. What the hell do you want this time?"

Mr. Yamashika started the conversation with obvious disdain.

It sounded like they were arguing, as I could hear him occasionally saying things like, "Why the hell would I do that!?" and "You've gotta be kidding me! I just handled something for you the other day!"

I couldn't tell what was going on, but in the end, it seemed like Mr. Yamashika gave in.

"Fine, fine, I'll take care of it, alright? Geez, do you really want to get my law license revoked or something? ...No, don't answer that. I get it, I'll do it, just stop talking with that annoying voice of yours."

He slammed the receiver down.

"W-Who was that?"

"The worst piece of shit in existence."

...There are so many people that Mr. Yamashika calls a piece of shit, I can't even begin to guess who it was.

"W-Which piece of shit are you talking about?"

"When I say 'the worst piece of shit in existence,' there's only one person that fits: Takeda! Remember that!"

Ughhh, he's snapping at me again... No, I need to stop crying over every little thing. I should work on developing some defensive techniques, like getting used to it, giving up, or just going with the flow.

Mr. Takeda. He's the vice president of the bar association that Mr. Yamashika belongs to. He wears glasses and can seem a bit intimidating, but I think he's basically a good person. After all, he hates Mr. Yamashika. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" is such an apt proverb.

"So, what did Mr. Takeda want?"

"Tch. Rejoice, Isshaku, we've been saddled with another court-appointed defense case."

"W-What!?"

I was surprised, but also delighted by what he said.

Mr. Yamashika's personality is the worst, his humanity is the lowest, and these days, I've started to think that there's no way to redeem him as a person. But his courtroom skills are something truly remarkable. In fact, the reason I came to this law office as a trainee was to learn those courtroom tactics. However, Mr. Yamashika's personality is so twisted—like a centipede tangled up in its own intestines—that no matter how much I bow and scrape, he won't teach me a thing. I've never even seen him take on a proper case.

Still, even in the most miserable situations, there's always a glimmer of hope. And here it is—the court-appointed defense. This system is for people who can't afford to hire a lawyer, where the government appoints one for them. Since it's meant to give young lawyers experience, these cases often involve relatively minor criminal offenses, and they tend to go to newer lawyers.

Though Mr. Yamashika has a lot of experience, he's still young and a relatively new lawyer. Plus, since he spends all day loafing around the office, the bar association keeps sending him these court-appointed cases. But every time, he comes up with some ridiculous excuse, like "My maternal grandfather passed away" or "My father's sister is gravely ill," and turns them down. From what I've heard, Mr. Yamashika's grandfather has "died" at least five times. Obviously, he can't keep turning them down with such flimsy excuses forever, and eventually, he gets threatened with the revocation of his law license, forcing him to accept a court-appointed case once in a while. Like today.

Whether it's a court-appointed defense or not, a court case is still a court case. It's a rare opportunity to see one of Mr. Yamashika's few moments of glory. My excitement began to rise rapidly.

"So, what kind of case is it?"

"Hmph, it's a petty theft case that I can't even muster up the will to care about."

I don't think there's any such thing as a "petty" criminal case, but... I kept that thought to myself. Who knows what he'd say if I voiced it. Ah, I'm such a hopeful future lawyer.

"The case itself is pretty simple," Mr. Yamashika continued. "The defendant's name is Rui Makizoe, a 21-year-old man. The crime scene was some supermarket. Apparently, he used to work there, but about a month ago, he was fired for losing some money from the store. Then, three nights ago, he allegedly broke into the supermarket and stole the sales money."

For a moment, the thought "a revenge prank for being fired" flashed through my mind, but I'd like to believe that was just the bad influence of Mr. Yamashika rubbing off on me.

"But, but it’s a false accusation, right? Surely?"

"How would I know that? Besides, it seems like the guy has never once denied the charges during interrogation. He’s been keeping silent the whole time."

"J-Just because he’s staying silent doesn’t mean he’s admitting to the crime!"

"Well, who knows? Maybe he’s staying silent because he knows there’s no point in making excuses at this stage?"

"..."

Why does this person always think of things in the worst possible way? He’s definitely a believer in the philosophy of total cynicism. Though, I’ve known that for a while now.

"Well, that’s about it. You’ve got the general gist of things, right?"

"Yes, more or less. Still, it’s rare, isn’t it? For Mr. Yamashika to tell me so much about a case—"

Then it hit me.

Ugh, I’m such an idiot. How did I not realize it? Why would Mr. Yamashika, who’s normally so lazy and only sees me as little more than a servant, bother to explain all these details to me?

"Uh, Mr. Yamashika, may I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Well, why have you been grinning like that, twisting your mouth and staring at me this whole time?"

The devilish smile on Mr. Yamashika’s face at that moment was so deeply etched into my memory that it would haunt my dreams for the next three days.

"Isshaku, I’m going to let you have another valuable experience. Come on, get ready for court!"

"W-Whaaaaaaaaat————————————!?"

◆

The detention room. It’s where people wait before their trial. Pretty self-explanatory.

I was there, waiting behind a transparent plastic window for the person who would become our client to show up.

"Alright, Isshaku. Time for another valuable experience."

Mr. Yamashika, who was sitting next to me, started spouting off something absurd again.

"I'll be supervising here, so you go get the details from the client. Got it?"

"But, but, sir—"

"How many times do I have to tell you not to talk back, you idiot!? No 'but's, no 'no's!"

"Ughhhhh..."

Fine. I'll think positively. I won't dwell on the fact that I've been stuck with another burdensome task.

Certainly, the experience of speaking with a client as their defense attorney will be valuable for me. I'll just focus on giving it my best, thinking about the future.

...Though, the fact that I'm falling into this mindset might be proof that I've already fallen into Mr. Yamashika's trap.

As I was thinking this, a young man finally sat down on the other side of the window.

Rui Makizoe. 21 years old, currently unemployed. Hmm, for someone arrested for theft, he doesn't seem like a bad person at all. He doesn't strike me as particularly clever, but he does seem like a serious guy.

"N-Nice to meet you, Mr. Makizoe. My name is Shinogi Kamatsuka, and I'll be handling your defense. This here is Mr. Yamashika, also a lawyer."

"Oh, uh, thank you..."

His voice sounded tired. Well, given the circumstances, I suppose that's understandable.

"So, Mr. Makizoe, we've already heard a rough outline of the situation, but we'd like to hear more details from you. First, we've been told that you've neither admitted nor denied your charges, and you've remained silent. Is there any particular reason for that?"

"...It's not really a big reason."

Makizoe answered quietly, as expected.

"I just don’t expect anything from the police. They won’t listen to a word I say, but they’ll believe whatever the store manager tells them."

"I see. Now, I heard there was some issue with money about a month ago..."

"Yeah. I used to work at this supermarket called 'Blackheart.'"

"Supermarket... 'Blackheart'?"

"Yeah. Is something wrong?"

"N-No, I just thought it was an unusual name. Oh, sorry, please continue."

"...Right. So I worked at this place called 'Blackheart,' but I got fired last month. There were several incidents where the store’s money went missing while I was managing it, and they told me I had to take responsibility."

"I’ve heard about that. But you didn’t steal the money, right, Mr. Makizoe?"

"Of course not! I finally landed that job in the middle of this lousy economy. I worked as hard as I could, and I would never, ever steal from the store!"

At that moment, Makizoe lowered his voice and spoke with a hint of resignation.

"Still, the police, the store manager, and even the coworkers I used to drink with—people I thought were on my side—treated me like a thief from the very beginning. They wouldn’t listen to a word I said. Obviously, I didn’t do it, so the police couldn’t arrest me at that time. But even then, they said something like, 'We don’t know who the culprit is, but it’s highly likely that it was an inside job.' And since that bastard Akutomi couldn’t pin the blame on me, they fired me, saying I had to take responsibility as the manager!"

"...A-Akutomi?"

"Yeah, that’s the store manager’s name. His full name is 'Tameo Akutomi.'"

...

...You could argue his name reads like "Evil Wealth Accumulating Man", but well, I suppose it’s not right to judge someone based on their name. Just like how someone named 'Zenko' ('good deeds') could still be a criminal.

"I see, I understand the situation. So, as for the current accusation that you broke into the store and stole money, you have no memory of doing anything like that, right?"

"..."

Huh...?

I thought he would immediately deny the accusation, but for some reason, Makizoe suddenly fell silent.

"Um, Mr. Makizoe?"

"...I did it."

"...Huh?"

"I'm the one who did it."

"...W-What?"

"When I quit the store, I left my watch behind. At first, I didn't think about going back to get it, but it wasn't a cheap watch for me. So three nights ago, I went back to the store to retrieve it. When I got there, no one was around, but there was a large sum of money just lying on the table. It was probably the day's sales or something...

I've spent this past month walking around looking for a job, but I haven't been able to find anything. The more I thought about that bastard Akutomi, the angrier I got. I didn't intend to steal anything. I just thought I'd hide it for a bit, to make them panic, you know? ...But I ended up taking a handful of it."

"Oh. Oh dear..."

"R-Really, it was just a moment of weakness! At first, I planned to return it right away! But when I went to the store the next day, the police were already there, and it had turned into a huge deal... Then I realized, 'They already treated me like a thief a month ago. If I try to return the money now, they'll just arrest me without a second thought.' So I couldn't bring myself to say anything and went home. Two days later, the police showed up, and here we are. I mean, I get that Japan's police are pretty good, but I really wish they'd done a better job investigating a month ago..."

"..."

I was at a loss for words.

"I... I see. So that's what happened. Then, that money you took... do you still have it?"

"No. Keeping it would be undeniable evidence, wouldn’t it? But I didn’t feel like spending it either, so I burned it."

"...You... burned it?"

What a disaster... This guy is definitely the culprit.

Uh, Mr. Yamashika? What am I supposed to do in a situation like this...?

I turned to him, clinging to a faint hope.

And—there he was, yawning, with a sleepy expression on his face.

◆

"We will now begin the preliminary hearing on the theft charges against the defendant, Mr. Rui Makizoe."

The judge declared.

"Ughhhh. So, we’re going with this pattern again..."

Sitting at the defense table, I let out a deep sigh and cried silently.

Then, the person sitting next to me, my teacher, mercilessly opened his mouth.

"Control yourself, Isshaku. The trial has already begun."

"It’s Kamatsuka..."

After that, I blurted out something like, "W-Well, anyway, please leave the defense to me. I’ll make sure to do whatever’s best for you, Mr. Makizoe," sounding like a 100% insincere excuse. I then hurriedly returned to the office, where I consulted Mr. Yamashika again, asking, "What should I do?"

But to my distress, Mr. Yamashika simply said:

"You don’t need to argue for his innocence anymore, so doesn’t that make things easier?"

"Prosecutor Naruse, please call the first witness."

The judge, oblivious to my confusion, spoke.

The person who stood up at that voice was none other than Prosecutor Naruse. He was the same person I faced the last time Mr. Yamashika dumped a trial on me.

"Understood. The prosecution’s first witness is Mr. Stafford, who works as part of the employee staff at the supermarket where the incident occurred."

...

S-Stafford? It’s as though his name was made for being a staff member... No, I better not say anything.

The employee appeared to be a slightly older man at first glance. He looked about ten years older than Mr. Makizoe.

"Now, I’d like to ask you about what happened around 10 PM on the night of the 13th, when the incident occurred. Where were you, and what were you doing?"

Prosecutor Naruse opened the questioning.

"I had just finished my shift and was about to leave through the back door of the store."

"Then, could you specifically describe what happened when you were about to go home?"

"Yes, I understand. Well, after I walked a bit on my way home, I heard a clattering sound from behind—the sound of the back door closing. I thought someone might have come out, so I turned around, but no one was there, so I didn’t think much of it and kept walking. But after walking a bit more, I heard the door closing again. I thought something was strange—if the door opened twice, it meant someone must have gone in or out—so I looked back again... and I saw someone running away from the back door."

"So, to summarize, right after you left the store, you saw someone coming in or out of the back door, correct?"

"Y-Yes, that’s right."

As expected of a prosecutor. A perfect summary.

"And did you recognize the person who ran away?"

"Yes, I did."

"Was it someone you knew?"

"Yes. I'd seen his face many times over the past six months at work."

"Is that person here in this courtroom?"

"Yes."

"Could you point them out?"

"It's him."

Mr. Stafford pointed directly at Mr. Makizoe, who was sitting next to Mr. Yamashika.

"Your Honor, that's all my questions."

"Understood. Defense counsel, do you have any cross-examination?"

The judge turned toward me.

Now then. For this trial, the defense strategy had already been somewhat determined by Mr. Yamashika's instructions:

"If it's just a petty theft for a first-time offender, no matter what defense you put up, they'll grant probation."

...In other words, a passive approach. It felt like this was synonymous with terms like "shirking responsibility" or "indolence."

With that in mind, I answered the judge as follows:

"No, I have no questions."

"Very well. Prosecution, please call the next witness."

"Understood. The next prosecution witness is the manager of the supermarket Blackheart, Mr. Tameo Akutomi."

The person who took the witness stand was a middle-aged man, probably in his 40s or 50s. Despite his name being Tameo Akutomi, he didn't look particularly villainous. It was similar to how Mr. Zenko Yamashika didn't exactly have the face of a good person.

"You were at the supermarket Blackheart around 10 PM on the night of the 13th, weren't you?"

"Yes, I’m the manager, so of course I was."

"What were you doing?"

"I was counting the day’s sales."

"How much money were you handling that day?"

"Uh, it was 10.503,87 dollars."

"Are you sure that amount is correct?"

"Yes. Counting the money is never done alone. I confirmed it together with Mr. Stafford earlier, and we also recorded it in the ledger, so I’m sure it’s accurate."

"I see. So, what happened after that?"

"It was getting a bit late, so I sent Mr. Stafford home for the day. Then, I was about to put the money in the safe, but I suddenly felt the need to use the restroom, so I went to the bathroom first, as it was closer than the safe."

"How long did you spend in the restroom?"

"Less than three minutes, I think."

"So you went to the restroom. What happened after that?"

"Yes. When I returned to the room, I immediately noticed something was wrong. The money, which should have been over 10 thousand dollars, had clearly decreased. I hurriedly recounted it, but sure enough, the cash—specifically the paper bills—had significantly decreased, leaving only about 4 thousand dollars."

"So, during the short time you were in the restroom, the money disappeared. What did you do next?"

"I reported it to the police."

"Thank you. Now, changing the subject, did you know the defendant prior to this incident?"

"Yes, of course. As Mr. Stafford mentioned earlier, he used to work for us."

"What was the defendant’s work performance like?"

"Overall, I'd say he was diligent and did well. However, he did cause one major problem..."

"Could you explain that in more detail?"

"Yes. It was about a month ago. At that time, Mr. Makizoe was in charge of one of our sales areas... but there was a discrepancy between the actual sales and the remaining balance. And this didn't happen just once or twice—the amounts involved were not small either."

"The defendant was the one managing those sales, correct?"

"Yes."

"And what did you do about it?"

"I reported it to the police and had them investigate, but they couldn't identify the culprit. I didn't necessarily believe that he had stolen it, but the fact of the matter was that Mr. Makizoe was the only one in a position to access that money. And when the same thing happens multiple times, there's no way to avoid holding the person in charge accountable for management failure."

"So you held the defendant responsible?"

"Yes, well. As I said, I didn't think he was the thief, but I felt he needed to take responsibility as the person in charge. That's why I didn't fire him as a form of punishment—it was more for his own good..."

"That's all my questions. Defense counsel, your cross-examination?"

I weakly stood up.

"No... no questions..."

"Very well. Prosecution, please call your next witness."

"Understood. The prosecution's final witness is Detective Ikawa, who handled the investigation of this case."

A stern-looking middle-aged man, fitting for his role as a detective, took the witness stand. As a detective, he seemed familiar with court proceedings, quickly completing his oath, and Prosecutor Naruse began his questioning.

"You were in charge of the investigation for this case, correct?"

"Yes."

"Could you explain in detail how you came to arrest the defendant?"

"Understood. First, one of the key features of this case, which became clear early in the investigation, was that the crime was committed in a very short period of time. The criminal knew exactly where the money was located in the store and how to access it. Based on this, we determined it was highly likely that someone familiar with the store—someone who had worked there—was responsible for the crime.

What was especially important was the eyewitness testimony of Mr. Stafford, the previous witness."

"You're referring to the testimony that he saw the defendant, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct. And while I'm at it, I should mention that I was also in charge of investigating the incident at Supermarket Blackheart a month ago, when part of the sales money went missing. Unfortunately, we weren't able to identify the culprit at that time, but the defendant, as the person responsible for managing the money, did come up during the investigation. Given that background, we asked the defendant to come to the station, where we decided to ask him straight out: 'Did you sneak into Supermarket Blackheart last night and steal the money?'"

"And how did the defendant respond?"

"Well, he stayed silent. Whether he was trying to invoke his right to remain silent or not, he didn't say a single word in protest."

"So, what did you do next?"

"Yes. If he hadn't done anything, he would have denied the charges. But he didn't do that. That's when we became convinced that he was involved in the crime in some way."

"And what happened after that?"

"First, there's the eyewitness testimony from Mr. Stafford, who saw the defendant on the night of the 13th. Considering that he'd seen the defendant's face every day for the past six months, the possibility of a mistake seemed low. Also, though it was a bit unclear, we found fingerprints that appeared to belong to the defendant on the table where the money was kept at the crime scene. When we confronted the defendant with the results of the investigation, he still didn't say a word in his defense and continued to remain silent. But with this much evidence in hand, we couldn't deny his involvement in the crime. As a result, we proceeded to arrest him."

"Thank you. No further questions."

Hmm, this is moving along quite matter-of-factly. Well, I guess a preliminary hearing for a case where the defendant actually committed the crime tends to go like this.

"Very well."

The judge nodded and looked in my direction.

"Defense, do you have any cross-examination?"

"No, I don't..."

"I see. Prosecutor Naruse, is that the end of the prosecution's case?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I believe we've presented more than enough evidence to support the suspicion that the defendant committed theft."

"Very well. Now, we'll move on to the defense's rebuttal... but since we've come this far in one go, I think we should take a short break. How does that sound?"

The judge looked toward both us and Prosecutor Naruse.

Indeed, just sitting here listening to the prosecutor's arguments was starting to get a bit tedious. We didn't have any particular plans to make any moves after this, but I had no objection to the idea of taking a break.

◆

"It'll be fine, Mr. Makizoe! I'm sure you'll get probation!"

My dry voice echoed in the defense waiting room.

"Sigh... Well, just do whatever you want. I don't care anymore."

Mr. Makizoe, perhaps understanding the situation he was in, slumped in his chair with an air of resignation.

And similarly, Mr. Yamashika—probably trying to maintain appearances in front of the defendant—sat there with a look on his face that said, "Let's just get this annoying trial over with already."

Ugh, I can already see how the rest of the trial will go.

'Defense counsel, please call your witness.'

‘No, we have no witnesses to call.’

‘I see. Then please proceed with your closing arguments.’

‘No, we have nothing to say.’

‘I see. Well, then. The trial is over.’

It’ll probably go on like that, one thing after another. Since Mr. Makizoe has already admitted his guilt to us, there’s not much of a defense we can put up. And so, I’m going to gain the dubious experience of making my client guilty for the first time in my life...

"S-Sorry, I’m just going to step out to the restroom for a bit."

Suddenly, Mr. Makizoe stood up from his seat.

Maybe he couldn’t stand the tense atmosphere in the room anymore. Well, it’s his own fault for committing the theft in the first place—it’s karma. ...But if I start thinking like that, I won’t last long as a lawyer, so I need to be careful. Ugh, I feel like my thoughts are getting darker and darker...

I was lost in thought when it happened.

Someone entered the room, which should have been off-limits to anyone but those involved in the case.

It was far too soon for Mr. Makizoe to have returned.

"Excuse me, Yamashika."

"Ugh."

Mr. Yamashika let out a groan, like a frog being crushed.

It was Mr. Takeda.

"W-What the hell are you doing here?"

Oh, this is rare. Mr. Yamashika is actually flustered.

"Well, I’m a lawyer too, you know. I had some business at the courthouse. I figured, since I was here, I’d stop by and see how you’re doing."

With that, Mr. Takeda raised his chin and looked down at Mr. Yamashika.

"I saw your trial earlier. I have to say, I was surprised. You've actually been training Kamatsuka pretty well, haven't you? You're even letting her experience defending in a criminal trial."

"W-Well, yeah."

Experience in a criminal trial? This isn't anything so noble—it's just a matter of Mr. Yamashika dumping a troublesome case on me. Nobody knows that better than Mr. Yamashika himself, and I could clearly see his face twitching in a very awkward way.

"I really was surprised. You're leaving almost all the work to Kamatsuka, aren't you? You must have a high opinion of her."

"Y-Yeah. Kamatsuka is quite an exceptional student. That's why I can trust her with the trial. It's a good experience for her too."

Even though he's calling me Kamatsuka, I don't feel the least bit happy about it. Whenever Mr. Yamashika praises me, it's only because it somehow benefits him.

"Well, of course. I wouldn't for a second think that you're just dumping all the work on Kamatsuka so you can take it easy. Sure, it's fine to let a budding lawyer handle things like the prosecution's case, but when it comes to the rebuttal, you'll show us your skills, right? If there's some irresponsible lawyer who just sits in his chair during the entire trial without fulfilling his duties, I'll have to take away his lawyer's badge, you know. Right, Yamashika?"

"Hahahaha-hahaaha-ha-ha! Of course, no such irresponsible lawyer exists. Naturally, I'll be showing off my skills as a lawyer in the upcoming proceedings."

"Huhuhu, I'm sure you will. I'm looking forward to it. I hope to see your unparalleled courtroom tactics in action."

"O-Of course. Just you wait. I'll win an acquittal with my expert defense."

"Oh really? That makes me even more excited. I'm eager to see how you'll turn this situation around. Well then, Kamatsuka, make sure to watch your mentor Yamashika's brilliant performance closely."

Laughing heartily, Mr. Takeda walked out.

As expected of someone who can be an equal rival to Mr. Yamashika. Quite the personality.

"Dammit... Why the hell is that bastard here..."

Mr. Yamashika grumbled irritably as he scratched his head.

"Hey, Isshaku. This is your fault. If you'd just wrapped up the trial quickly, this wouldn't have happened."

"W-What?! But you were watching, Mr. Yamashika! I haven't done much of anything in this trial!"

Bam! Mr. Yamashika slammed the desk.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to talk back?!"

"Y-Yes, I'm sorry, it's all my fault..."

Ughhh, I thought I'd run out of tears, but now they're welling up again...

"Damn it. I guess there's no choice. If I don't do anything in the next part of the trial, that bastard's going to have a field day with me... Fine, I'll put in a little effort."

"Huh...?"

Is he actually going to take the trial seriously? That might be interesting, but—

But even though Mr. Makizoe hasn't confessed, he has admitted to us that he's guilty. So what exactly is the plan?

As I tilted my head in confusion, speak of the devil, Mr. Makizoe returned from the restroom.

"Hey, Makizoe," my mentor asked, "I was listening to the testimony just now, and one thing struck me as odd. Can you clear something up for me?"

Perhaps taken by surprise, Mr. Makizoe looked a bit flustered.

"H-Huh? What is it?"

"Think back to that testimony from the store manager, Akutomi. He said that out of the 10 thousand dollars in cash, around 6 thousand were stolen, right? But if I recall correctly, you said in the holding cell that you only took a handful of bills, didn't you?"

"Yeah, that's right. But what about it? ...Ah!"

Suddenly, Mr. Makizoe shouted.

"Damn it! That bastard! I never had a chance to hear how much was actually stolen... That scumbag manager! He pulled one over on me!"

What was he so angry about? I had no idea.

"Um, Mr. Yamashika, what's going on here?"

"Huh? You don't get it? It's a simple matter. Think about it. When you go shopping at a supermarket, do you always pay with large bills?"

"No, of course not. I hardly ever even have 100 dollar bills in my wallet... Ah!"

That's when it hit me too.

Right, the 10 thousand dollars in sales. It couldn't all have been in 100 dollar bills. There had to have been some 10 dollars and 20 dollar bills mixed in. Let's say, for argument's sake, that even just 10% of it—1 thousand dollars—was in 10 dollar bills. That alone would make for 100 bills. If it were 20%, that would be 200 bills, 30% or 40% even more. And the bills probably weren't neatly bundled, so there's no way they could have been thick enough to grab in just one handful.

Yet despite all that, Mr. Akutomi testified that nearly 4 thousand dollars were gone. And with Mr. Makizoe's reaction just now, there's only one conclusion.

"So, Mr. Akutomi lied about how much was stolen and pocketed some of it himself?!"

"What else could it be? Think about it—it's a clever move. After all, a thief did break in, and who's going to listen to a thief claiming, 'I only took a handful'? No one. And it's not like stores these days don't have theft insurance."

"That's right," Mr. Makizoe said, choking the words out. "That store definitely had insurance. So, he could take double the money and walk away scot-free, huh?"

"Exactly. And you burned the money you took, so there's no evidence left. The thief's claim won't be taken seriously, and everything is perfectly covered up. Mr. Akutomi's living up to his name, that's for sure."

"No way..."

I groaned. Sure, Mr. Makizoe was in the wrong for stealing the money and not returning it, even if he hadn't meant any harm. But Mr. Akutomi, taking advantage of that to steal money himself, was just as guilty. Still, as Mr. Yamashika said, it's impossible to accuse Mr. Akutomi. To do that, we'd have to prove that Mr. Makizoe didn't steal 4 thousand dollars. But who, other than a defense attorney, would believe that a thief only took a handful of bills? Yes, only we defense attorneys—

Just then, Mr. Yamashika suddenly stood up.

What’s going on? He suddenly seemed filled with some kind of fighting spirit.

"Mr. Makizoe. You were fired a month ago for an unfair reason, right? And it sounds like this Akutomi guy isn’t exactly innocent either. Consider this a freebie. For this case, I’m going to get you off the hook."

"...Huh?"

The sound of both my and Mr. Makizoe’s stunned voices harmonized.

◆

"Shall we now resume the trial? Defense counsel, are you ready?"

The judge asked.

"Yes, Your Honor. We are ready."

It wasn’t me who answered. It was Mr. Yamashika.

In this trial, where even Mr. Makizoe admitted to the crime, what could Mr. Yamashika possibly argue to win an acquittal?

"We call Mr. Akutomi as a witness for the defense."

The first person Mr. Yamashika called to the stand was the store manager of Supermarket Blackheart, Mr. Akutomi.

"Mr. Akutomi, let’s get straight to it. First, could you tell us how long the defendant worked under you?"

Mr. Akutomi appeared to think for a moment before answering.

"Well, since the spring... I’d say about six months."

"I see, so he worked for you for six months. Now, you testified that you trusted the defendant enough to put him in charge of one of the sales areas, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"When you say 'put him in charge of a sales area,' could you explain more specifically what that entails?"

"Well, we run a supermarket, but we don't just sell groceries. We also sell things like prepared foods and snacks, so it's a bit like a department store basement. We delegate one of these sales areas to capable employees."

"I see. That's very clear. So, it's fair to say the defendant was a good worker, wasn't he? After all, you entrusted him with a sales area within six months of hiring him."

"Yes, well, that's true."

"Now, when you fired him a month ago, didn't you think it was strange? Did you really believe that such an outstanding employee would steal from the store?"

"N-No, I didn't think he stole the money. But he was in charge of managing it, and since this had happened more than once, I had to hold him accountable."

"I see. Let's set that aside for now. I'd like to ask you about the day of the incident.

First, let me ask: These days, there's quite a lot of crime going around, right? You often hear about supermarkets being robbed, or in worse cases, entire safes being stolen. You've heard of such incidents, haven't you?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Given that situation, you testified that you left a large sum of money lying on a desk while you went to the restroom, correct?"

"Uh, yes."

"Don't you think that was incredibly careless?"

"Well, the restroom was close, and I figured as long as I came right back, it'd be fine—"

Mr. Yamashika slammed his hand down on the desk, cutting off Mr. Akutomi's testimony.

"That's not what I'm asking. In a time when supermarket thefts are rampant, wasn't it extremely careless of you to leave such a large sum of money out in the open? That's the question."

"Well, yes, I suppose that was careless."

As expected, Mr. Yamashika's questioning was ruthless. Faced with a question like that, anyone would have to answer yes.

"So, you admit that this was your own negligence, correct?"

"Well, if that’s what you’re saying, I suppose that’s fine."

"That’s not an answer. Let me ask again. Leaving a large sum of money out in the open, even for a short time, was incredibly careless, and it was your fault. Isn’t that right?"

"I-I’m saying, if that’s what you want to say, then fine!"

"It seems you still don’t understand. Let me ask one more time. Leaving a large sum of money out in the open was incredibly careless on your part—"

"Alright! Yes, it was my fault!"

Finally, he snapped. At that moment, Mr. Yamashika grinned with a wicked smile.

"So, despite being the manager and having a position of responsibility, you were careless, correct?"

You could almost hear a slimy sound effect in the background.

"Yes, fine! Maybe I was a little careless! But why do I have to be the one getting grilled like this? The real criminal here is the thief who stole the money!"

"Now that you’ve come to understand that, we can move on. By the way, Mr. Akutomi, you’re about to step down as the store manager, aren’t you?"

"...Huh?"

Mr. Akutomi looked completely taken aback.

"No, it’s not 'huh.' Let me remind you of a young man. This young man worked tirelessly after being hired and was entrusted with one of the store’s sales areas. However, when the money he was responsible for managing went missing, he was held accountable and fired by none other than you. According to some, the one who should really be held responsible is the thief who stole the money."

Wow, that’s quite a stretch. Though it’s pretty convincing.

"Surely, after doing that to someone, you wouldn’t just shrug off the responsibility yourself, would you?"

"W-Well, um, how should I put it—"

"I-I object!"

At this moment, Prosecutor Naruse raised his voice.

"T-This line of questioning doesn't seem relevant to the charges against the defendant in this case."

He's right. So far, the testimony seems more about getting Mr. Makizoe reinstated at Supermarket Blackheart than anything that directly relates to guilt or innocence.

But I think I understand Mr. Yamashika's aim. He's probably trying to gain the jury's sympathy by showing how unfairly the defendant has been treated.

"No further questions."

Without contesting the objection, Mr. Yamashika simply ended his questioning.

No one could have predicted this turn of events. The courtroom fell into silence, and even the jury seemed stunned.

I had suspected it for a while, but it's clear now—Mr. Yamashika is a devil.

"I call Mr. Stafford to the stand."

Next up was an employee, Mr. Stafford.

"You started working at Supermarket Blackheart at the same time as the defendant, right?"

"Y-Yes."

He seemed a bit frightened, likely because he'd heard the previous questioning.

"Then let me get straight to the point. What did you think of the defendant?"

"Huh? W-What do you mean...?"

"According to Mr. Akutomi's testimony, the defendant was an outstanding worker, wasn't he?"

"Y-Yes, well, he was the most successful out of all of us who started at the same time."

"I see, I see."

Mr. Yamashika nodded as if he were satisfied, but it looked a bit exaggerated.

Then, without batting an eye, he threw out a bombshell.

"Mr. Stafford, did you ever feel envious of the defendant?"

"Wha—!?"

That must've been a real sucker punch. His face stiffened completely.

"W-What do you mean by that!?"

"The defendant was your peer, but he received far higher evaluations than you. On top of that, he was much younger than you. Given that situation, I think it's only natural that you felt envious of him, don't you?"

"W-Wait a minute! Stop saying I was jealous like it's some established fact! I've never harbored feelings like that, not even once!"

"Then, regarding the incident a month ago, when the defendant was fired after being held responsible for losing that money... allow me to ask you one question."

"Wha... What is it?"

"At that time, as his colleague who started at the same time, did you ever once speak to the manager on his behalf, asking him not to fire the defendant?"

Wow... Incredible. To ask that kind of question right there.

Come to think of it, Mr. Makizoe did say that his coworkers treated him like a thief.

Mr. Stafford struggled to get the words out.

"W-Well... There was no reason for me to stick up for someone who was a thief, was there!?"

"Oh, that's strange. The culprit who stole the money was never found, was he? Or are you saying you can prove that the defendant was the real thief?"

"N-No, I can't do that."

"Alright, then let me repeat the question. Despite the fact that your coworker was about to be fired, you never once tried to defend him. Is that correct? Please, just a simple yes or no. No excuses."

That's cruel. In this situation, he has no choice but to answer yes.

"...Y-Yes."

A reply squeezed out of him.

"Thank you. That's what I wanted to hear. Now, let's go back to a previous question. You're saying you never felt envious of the defendant, who was younger and more successful than you?"

"T-That's not true! No, I didn't!"

"Despite the fact that you never once tried to defend him?"

"O-Objection!"

At this point, Prosecutor Naruse stood up again.

"The defense is asking malicious questions, trying to trap the witness!"

Before the judge could rule on the objection, Mr. Yamashika continued.

"Fine, I'll withdraw that question and move on to the next one. Mr. Stafford, please answer. Did you ever steal the money under the defendant's management in order to sabotage his career?"

"T-That's ridiculous! Of course not!"

"Objection, Your Honor! T-This is nothing but the defense spouting nonsense!"

The witness and the prosecutor were both shouting in anger. But Mr. Yamashika showed no sign of being intimidated.

"Then let me change the question. Mr. Stafford, aside from you and the defendant, there were many other employees, weren't there?"

"W-Well, probably around a few dozen..."

"Then can you say with absolute certainty that none of those employees were envious of the defendant's success?"

"O-Objection! There's no point in asking a witness to testify about what others might be thinking!"

"Then, I'll move on to my next question."

By now, the courtroom was completely under Mr. Yamashika's control. No one even seemed to care about Prosecutor Naruse's objections.

"You testified that on the night of the incident, you saw the defendant leaving the store, didn't you?"

"Y-Yes, I did."

"Are you sure it was the defendant?"

"Y-Yes, I'm pretty sure."

"Really? In the middle of the night, with only the streetlights to go by? And from your testimony, it sounds like you only got a glimpse of someone running away. On top of that, the defendant was never close enough to you for you to even try to stop him when he was fired. Given the circumstances, can you really say with certainty that the person you saw running away was the defendant?"

Poor Mr. Stafford. I really felt sorry for him at that moment.

Had the situation been a little different, he might have been able to confidently say, "Yes, I'm sure it was the defendant!"

But his opponent was none other than Mr. Yamashika, who had thoroughly beaten him down. If he argued any more, who knows what Mr. Yamashika might throw at him next. And there was probably some guilt over not standing up for the defendant when he was fired. It was clear that Mr. Stafford's will had long since been broken.

"Now that I think about it, I'm starting to lose a bit of confidence..."

"I thought so, I thought so."

Mr. Yamashika smiled again, a sly grin spreading across his face.

"Now, think about this: It was only a matter of minutes that the manager left the cash unattended while he went to the restroom. Is it really possible that the defendant, who had been fired a month earlier, just happened to come in at that exact moment and managed to walk away with the money?

I find it much more reasonable to think this. Let's say there was someone who pretended to leave the store but stayed outside, watching. Then, by sheer luck, the manager, who wasn't being careful at all, left the cash unattended and went to the restroom. That person then quickly sneaked back into the store, stole the money, and the next day, when the theft came to light, told the police, 'I saw the guy who got fired last month near the store last night.'"

"Wha—!"

That’s too much, Mr. Yamashika!

I almost shouted out.

Mr. Stafford is innocent! The real culprit is definitely the defendant! I wanted to scream. Oh, how I wanted to scream. But I couldn’t...

It’s true that at this point, the suspicion against the defendant is probably starting to fade. But from Mr. Stafford’s perspective, this must feel awful. He came to testify out of goodwill, only to suddenly be treated like the culprit.

"P-Please, just stop already!"

Mr. Stafford looked like he was about to burst into tears. And it was no wonder.

"I'm not the criminal! I swear! It’s true that I saw someone leaving the store that night! I won't say it was the defendant anymore! But I definitely saw someone, that much is certain!"

However, it seemed Mr. Yamashika didn’t know the meaning of the word "mercy." He delivered the final blow, as if to seal the deal.

"Don’t you think the defendant, who is being treated as the criminal who stole the money, must be feeling exactly the same way as you?"

"Objection!"

"No further questions."

Mr. Yamashika stepped back without any resistance, and Mr. Stafford’s nightmare finally came to an end.

"Next, I call Detective Ikawa to the stand."

Mr. Yamashika summoned the next sacrificial lamb.

But this time, the opponent was no pushover. Detective Ikawa maintained his composure as a detective as he took the witness stand.

"Now then, Detective Ikawa."

Mr. Yamashika started his questioning gently.

"You testified earlier that you were also in charge of the investigation during the previous incident when money went missing at Supermarket Blackheart, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Which means—"

Mr. Yamashika's face twisted into a sly grin. He was about to throw a bombshell out of nowhere.

"You're incompetent as a detective, aren't you?"

"Wha—!?"

Detective Ikawa's face stiffened instantly.

"Because, isn't that the case? In any incident, there are only two outcomes: it's either solved or unsolved. If we were to rank detectives, it would only be by their ability to solve cases. And you didn't solve the case. From the victim's perspective, you could very well be called an incompetent detective. Isn't that right?"

Here it was. Mr. Yamashika's three-step logic. Skipping over the process and jumping straight to the conclusion.

"O-Objection!"

As expected, Prosecutor Naruse raised an objection. He said something along the lines of, "The defense is trying to trap the witness." But Mr. Yamashika didn't seem fazed in the slightest.

"Then let me change the question. During the previous case, you suspected the defendant but ultimately failed to arrest him, leaving a blemish on your record, didn't you? Then, this incident occurred, and the same person quickly became a suspect again. So, eager for revenge, you happily arrested him. Isn't that what happened?"

"N-No! I would never mix personal feelings with my work! And what about the fingerprints!? The defendant's fingerprints were found at the crime scene! Isn't that solid evidence?"

"Are you saying the fingerprints were so clear and indisputable that you can definitively declare they were the defendant's?"

"Uh, w-what?"

Detective Ikawa’s voice suddenly dropped in tone.

"If I recall correctly, you testified that the fingerprints were somewhat unclear, but they appeared to belong to the defendant. You never said anything about being able to definitively identify them.

Remember, the defendant used to work at that supermarket. It’s not at all strange for his fingerprints to be there. Since they were from over a month ago, it makes sense that you couldn’t lift clear prints. Isn’t that a more natural conclusion?"

"T-That may be true, but, b-but, it also may not be. I-I mean, uh..."

Detective Ikawa continued to mumble incoherently for a while.

And off to the side—

I could see Prosecutor Naruse slump his shoulders in defeat.

After this, the trial moved into the closing arguments.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the matter is clear. Let me state the conclusion first: the defendant is innocent. After hearing all the testimony, I believe you’ve already deduced this yourselves. First, let’s consider the incident from a month ago. It was clearly orchestrated by one of the defendant’s coworkers to frame him. There’s no other way to see it. After all, there’s no plausible reason why someone as successful as the defendant would commit such a crime.

Now, let’s turn to the present case, which occurred three days ago. First, let me explain why the defendant remained silent during the police interrogation. It’s because he knew exactly what was happening. The police had already decided from the outset that he was the culprit. He understood that no matter how much he denied it, they wouldn’t listen to him.

Now, let’s review what we’ve learned from this trial. The testimony claiming to have seen the defendant near the crime scene is unreliable. It’s also clear that the store manager bears some responsibility for leaving a large sum of money unattended while going to the restroom.

And here’s the most crucial point: where is the stolen money now? If the defendant had stolen it, the police, who conducted a thorough investigation, should have presented it as evidence. However, as you are all aware, no such crucial evidence has been submitted.

There is only one conclusion to be drawn. The defendant did not steal the money and is innocent. A month ago, despite working with all his might, he was unfairly dismissed from his job. And this time, based on unreliable assumptions, he was wrongfully arrested. He is a young

man who has been cruelly toyed with by fate. I ask you, please, with your decision, break this chain of misfortune."

...After such a dramatic cross-examination, no one could argue with Mr. Yamashika's closing statement.

And I don't think I even need to tell you what the verdict was.

Thus, Mr. Makizoe was also released with a bright, relieved expression, saying, "I guess the world isn't such a bad place after all."

Well, considering he lost his job for an unfair reason and what Mr. Akutomi had probably done, I'd say it's fine.

As I reflected on Mr. Yamashika's methods, I couldn't help but feel both awe and fear. Will I be able to become like him someday? Or rather, should I even aspire to become like that? I was filled with uncertainty.

(My First Trial Episode 2: Zenko Strikes Back -- End)

とある共産主義者の理不尽な日々

The Unreasonable Days of a Certain Communist

That day was, for me, an extraordinarily unreasonable day.

It was Saturday. There was no school. Like every other student in Japan, I had turned off my alarm and planned to sleep until noon.

But at 11 AM, my sleep was abruptly interrupted.

"Thank you for your hard work on this hot day. I'm Taro Yamada, 32 years old, from the ○× Party. I'm young. Today, I'm giving it my all again. Oh, someone with voting rights just waved at me. Thank you for your support. I'm Taro Yamada, 32 years old, and I'm young."

An election.

Ugh, the campaign truck was so noisy, seriously. There was no way someone with delicate nerves like mine could keep sleeping.

I understand that elections are a symbol of democracy and an essential part of it. And since this country, unfortunately, still adheres to democracy, I reluctantly accept that for the duration of the election campaign, I'll have to tolerate loud speeches.

However.

"Thank you for your hard work on this hot day. I'm Taro Yamada, 32 years old, from the ○× Party. I'm young. Today, I'm giving it my all again. Oh, someone with voting rights just waved at me. Thank you for your support. I'm Taro Yamada, 32 years old, and I'm young."

He kept saying the same thing over and over.

Yes, that idiot candidate was just playing a recording on a loop. Every time, he greeted in the same tone, and every time, someone supposedly waved at him in support. How ridiculous.

If he was talking about something like, "I'll make these changes if I get elected and join the ranks of power," or if he were presenting something called a manufacture or a manifesto or whatever, I might understand. But to blast a recording full of pleasant greetings at full volume and disturb my precious sleep—well, that's just unbearable. These people go on about how "education is the foundation of this country," but they clearly don't understand how important Saturday morning sleep is for students. Honestly, if it weren't for the Public Offices Election Act, I'd love to pull a nasty prank on them!

Lately, I've been thinking more and more that the world is fundamentally unfair.

With thoughts like that running through my head, and now fully awake, I had no choice but to go wash my face.

◆

Suddenly, let me tell you that I call my parents "Mom" and "Dad." Well, that’s pretty normal. My younger brother, however, calls them "Ma" and "Pa." I always feel like teasing him for using such old-fashioned terms, but I have to admit, "Ma" and "Pa" are easier to say than "Mom" and "Dad." Maybe this is one of those pearls of wisdom passed down through the ages.

Anyway, I digress.

While I usually call my parents "Mom" and "Dad," the way I address them changes depending on the situation. For example, in moments like this, when I really want something but don’t have enough allowance, I address my mother like this:

"Hey, Mother dearest?"

"No."

"...I haven’t even said anything yet."

"Whenever you call me 'Mother dearest,' it’s always a prelude to a bad proposal. But fine, I’ll hear you out."

"Um, I was hoping I could borrow just a little bit of my allowance in advance..."

"No."

"..."

At times like this, I feel like acting out, just a little bit.

"Aw, come on, just a little. It’s almost the end of the month already. Mother dearest, pleeease?"

"Sigh, you’re so persistent. Fine, let’s do this. If you go out and buy some ingredients for dinner before evening, I’ll give you next month’s allowance in advance."

"Hmm."

I hesitated slightly.

Running errands as a middle schooler felt a bit undignified. But the image of a beautiful girl like me shopping for groceries at the supermarket might come across as domestic and picturesque.

Besides, in this situation, if I didn’t accept her terms, there was no way I’d get an advance on my allowance.

I had no choice.

"Fine, fine. I’ll go."

"Alright, just wait a moment. I’ll make a shopping list."

At the time, I couldn’t have imagined that this simple errand would drag me into an even deeper spiral of absurdity.

◆

And so, I left the house and headed toward the supermarket.

However—once I arrived at the supermarket, holding a shopping basket in one hand and the shopping list in the other—I found myself at a loss.

The problem was with one of the items on the list.

Carrots, onions, potatoes, beef, curry powder, and… "bakorn."

"...Bakorn?"

Huh. What in the world is that?

What a silly-sounding word. It made me think of a metal bucket dropping from a height and clanging loudly.

Thinking rationally, it was probably a typo for "bacon." But how does someone even mix up "bacon" and "bakorn"? And based on the other items on the list, it was pretty clear tonight’s dinner was going to be curry. And we never, ever put bacon in our curry.

Or maybe there’s some new food called "bakorn" that was recently featured on a TV show or something?

Hmm, what should I do? I could call home and resolve this quickly, but if I did that, I might hear:

"Oh dear, are you telling me you don’t know what 'bakorn' is?"

Being mocked like that would be quite humiliating.

So, my next option was to ask someone at the store…

Let’s imagine it.

A sunny afternoon.

A beautiful girl, holding a shopping basket, walks up to a young store clerk with a concerned expression.

"Excuse me, can I ask you something?"

"Y-Yes, what is it?"

The clerk, flustered by the sight of this extraordinary beauty, stammers in response.

And then, the beautiful girl says:

"Um, where can I find 'bakorn'?"

...No, no, no. That would completely ruin my image. And if it turned out "bakorn" didn’t even exist, I’d be the laughingstock of my neighborhood from that day forward.

I had no choice. I hated the idea of being mocked by my mother, but I’d rather that than be seen as some weird person. I pulled out my phone and called home.

After a few rings, my mother’s familiar voice came through the speaker.

'Hello, this is Satsuki.'

"Hi, it’s me."

'Oh my, is this an 'it's me' scam? Just so you know, I’m not paying a single cent, even if my daughter gets into a traffic accident or fails her revolutionary mission. After all, I only picked her up from under a bridge.'

"Would you please stop confusing me with an 'it's me' scammer? And don’t just drop shocking statements like that! Are you saying I’m secretly Lenin’s child!?"

'What are you talking about, Iyo? Lenin died in the first half of the 20th century, didn’t he? You’re in middle school, so the math doesn’t add up.'

"Well, that was Lenin’s body double who died then! The real Lenin is still somewhere in Russia, studying true socialism—at least, that’s the rumor among certain circles."

'Oh, I see. But that would make Lenin over a hundred years old, wouldn’t it? How did he manage to father a child?'

"Heh, you need that kind of stamina if you’re going to lead the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution—wait, that’s not why I called, Mom!"

'Oh, then what is it?'

"It’s about this shopping list. What the heck is 'bakorn'?"

'Oh my, little Iyo. You don’t know what 'bakorn' is?'

...Exactly the words I had imagined. And as expected, I was getting annoyed.

"Even I don’t know everything! So, what is 'bakorn'?"

'Bakorn, you see, is short for "baked corn," or grilled corn. There was a stand in front of the supermarket, wasn’t there?'

"How was I supposed to know thaaaaat!?"

The world is truly unfair.

◆

After finishing my errand, I somehow ended up stopping by the Yamashika Law Office. There wasn’t any particular reason. It was just near the supermarket, so I dropped in on a whim. Of course, I certainly didn’t have any secret intention of swiping another book or anything.

That day at the Yamashika Law Office, despite it being a Saturday, everything seemed to be as normal as ever.

Zenko was, as usual, lazily flipping through the newspaper, and next to him, the apprentice lawyer, Kamatsuka, was tearfully scrubbing the floor, muttering, "Why do I have to do this?" Meanwhile, Zenko, in a completely un-lawyer-like act of human rights abuse, barked at him, "Shut it! You got a problem with my orders? Hurry up and work!"

What a completely uninteresting scene. I quickly entered the office and immediately started looking for a book to take home.

"Hey, kid. If you’re going to trespass, at least have the decency to say hello."

"What are you talking about, Zenko? It’s called trespassing because I didn’t say anything, right?"

For some reason, Kamatsuka chimed in with a pleased expression, "Ah, I see! That's exactly as little Satsuki says!"

"…Don't you chime in, Isshaku. Just keep cleaning quietly."

"My name is Kamatsuka…"

Honestly, the fact that a lawyer like this is fawned over for being undefeated—or maybe just plain underhanded—is ridiculous.

At that moment.

"Thank you for your hard work on this hot day. I'm Taro Yamada, 32 years old, from the ○× Party. I'm young. Today, I'm giving it my all again. Oh, someone with voting rights just waved at me. Thank you for your support. I'm Taro Yamada, 32 years old, and I'm young."

Once again, Taro Yamada's pre-recorded campaign speech blared through the air.

How could he not be embarrassed to carry out such a pointless election campaign? Who would feel inclined to vote for him after this?

But at the same time, I suddenly had a question.

Yes, the election was coming up soon. How would this embodiment of absurdity, Zenko, cast his vote? I couldn't imagine him abstaining. After all, Zenko is the kind of person who can't resist using any power or right available to him, no matter what it is. But then, would he vote for the ruling party? The opposition? The conservatives? Or maybe the reformists?

This was unexpectedly interesting. Zenko's personality screamed opposition party, but at the same time, he had a fondness for power. He might support the ruling party.

Well, whatever. The guy was right here, so I might as well ask.

"Hey, I've been wondering. There's a House of Representatives election coming up soon, right? How are you planning to vote, Zenko?"

"Are you an idiot? That's obvious."

"Hmph. Who are you calling an idiot?! So, how are you voting then?!"

"With the ballot box, of course. No point in putting it in the trash."

How disappointing.

…Never mind. Whatever. I was stupid to expect a serious answer from him.

Then, right after that.

I was hit with yet another absurdity.

Suddenly, the phone rang.

Zenko, who had been flipping through the newspaper just to kill time, tossed it aside, clicked his tongue in annoyance, and picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Yamashika Law Office. …What? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh."

When Zenko gets a sales call, he usually cuts them off in less than three seconds. But this time, since the call had lasted over three seconds, it seemed to be work-related. Still, all I could hear was him grunting, "Uh-huh, uh-huh," so I had no idea what kind of job it was.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh, well, I'm free. Uh-huh, sure, that's fine. Uh-huh, understood. See you at four."

How unusual. It seemed like the conversation had wrapped up.

"Mr. Yamashika, who was that? Is someone coming?"

Isshaku asked the obvious question.

"Yeah, someone's coming at four. Which means you and the kid over there should either go home or hide in the next room before then. And don't show your faces."

"Hmph. So you're going to exclude us again?"

"Of course. What good would you do here?"

Hmph. I'd been flat-out rejected. Zenko, of all people, acting all high and mighty.

But at that moment, I noticed something strange about Zenko's behavior.

Normally, when a client comes, Zenko puts on a thoroughly annoyed, irritated face. But this time, while he was pretending to look annoyed, he seemed oddly excited.

Something was definitely up. I had planned to leave soon, but now I couldn't go home until I saw what kind of client came and what kind of request they brought.

And then, at 4 PM.

To me, the client seemed utterly insane.

◆

"Oh, thank you, thank you. I'm sorry to drop in on you so suddenly, Mr. Yamashika."

The man entered, bowing deeply, looking every bit like a stereotypical Japanese corporate warrior.

Peeking through a crack in the door from the next room, I watched the scene unfold, my head lined up with Kamatsuka's.

"Oh! I've seen that man before!" Kamatsuka said excitedly above my head.

"Really? Who is he?"

"That's Uragami, a producer from Hinomoto Television. He's a well-known mover and shaker—I read about him in some magazine."

"A television producer!?"

I had a bad feeling. Surely not… But could Zenko, that jerk, be planning to… overlook an extraordinary super-beauty like me...?

"Well then, let's hear what brings you here," Zenko asked.

"Alright, let's get straight to the point. Mr. Yamashika, have you heard of a show called 'The Law Consultation Office Where Sometimes Even a Line Forms'?"

*TL Note: parody of the actual Japanese TV show "The Law Consultation Office Where Lines Form"

"Yes, I'm aware of it. Some colleagues of mine appear on it."

Of course, I knew it too. It's a popular legal advice show where viewers submit their everyday concerns, and three lawyers give them advice. Its catchphrase is "We'll settle even love triangles nice and roundly!" It's a pretty popular show, and even my family watches it together when we have time.

"Well, one of the three lawyers on the show participated in a marathon recently. The marathon itself went fine, but the fatigue from it has affected his ability to appear on the show. So, we've been looking for someone to fill in, and during that search, we heard about you, Mr. Yamashika."

"…Excuse me, but what exactly did you hear about me?"

Zenko slightly grimaced as he asked.

"Well, I heard that you're a brilliant lawyer who, at just twenty-something years old, has set up your own law office and never loses in court."

"Oh, I see. Well, that's fine then."

"…? Um, is there some other rumor going around?"

"No, no, no, nothing to worry about, hahahaha. Anyway, please continue."

"…Alright."

At times like this, I can't help but admire Zenko's thick-skinned ability to keep a straight face.

"So, in short, we'd like you to appear on our show as a substitute lawyer. What do you think?"

…From the moment I heard "TV producer," I had a feeling, but of course, it's come to this…

"Hmm, so that's what this is about."

Zenko, putting on a show, pulled out a planner from who knows where and started flipping through it.

"I'm not particularly interested in appearing on TV. My schedule is quite packed as it is."

That con artist. I've never once seen Zenko actually write anything in a planner. Where did he even get that prop?

"Mr. Yamashika, please, can't you reconsider? We'll make sure the recording is short so it won't interfere with your work."

"Hmm, but honestly, I have no interest in appearing on television. After all, I must prioritize helping my clients who've been wrongly accused."

"I see… You're right, Mr. Yamashika. I apologize for asking so much when you're so busy. I guess we'll just have to find another lawyer—"

"Oh, no, no, no! However, it’s true that we lawyers have a duty to make the law more accessible to the public. Since you’ve gone through the trouble of coming all the way here, even though I’m not too enthusiastic about it, I suppose if you insist, I’ll appear on the show."

"Oh! Really? Thank you so much!"

…I just don’t even feel like commenting anymore.

That producer must be crazy. If they had asked this 14-year-old, popular, beautiful middle schooler—who will one day be a famous lawyer like me—to appear, I could understand. But what are they thinking, putting a rotten, washed-up lawyer like him on TV?

The world is truly unfair.

But even more absurdly, the day's absurdities weren’t over yet.

◆

"I'm home! Look, I even bought you some bakorn! …Wait, huh?"

When I returned from my errand, the dining kitchen was completely empty.

That’s odd. I can understand that Dad and my little brother weren’t home, but even Mom’s not here. Did she mention going out today?

Well, whatever. They’ll be back by dinner. I guess I’ll just hole up in my room and read for a bit.

But—waiting for me in my room was the biggest absurdity of the day.

As soon as I got close to my room, I knew something was off.

The light in my room, where no one should be, was on. Not only that, I could faintly hear laughter. And it was—my mother’s laughter.

I had a bad feeling as I rushed into my room.

"Mom, what are you doing in my room without permission!?"

"Oh, welcome home, little Iyo."

Mom was reading something.

"Ah! T-That’s…!"

It was my Communist Studies Notebook, which I had hidden under my bed. It's a notebook where I've jotted down everything I've learned from various books so I wouldn't forget. It's a one-of-a-kind, invaluable notebook—a modern-day Communist manual, so to speak.

"Little Iyo, you write some interesting things, don't you? But while studying communism is all well and good, I think you should read some books on capitalism too. That way, you'll be able to see things from more perspectives."

She saw it. She saw that.

For me, that notebook is almost like a diary. It's embarrassing enough that someone else read something I wrote with no intention of showing anyone.

"S-Shut up! I can read whatever I want! More importantly, why were you rifling through my room without permission, reading my stuff!? That's a crime! You're a thief!"

"Oh my, there you go, making me out to be the bad guy again. I was just cleaning your room, you know. I just happened to find this notebook by chance. I think I deserve thanks, not accusations of being a criminal."

"I can clean my own room! I have my own privacy, you know! I'll sue you for infringing on my basic human rights!"

"Oh dear. Little Iyo, does that mean you don't need your allowance in advance anymore?"

"I'm sorry! Please forgive me, I was wrong!"

"Alright, as long as you understand. Besides, parents have an obligation to supervise their children. It's part of our job to know what our children are thinking."

Ugh, how underhanded.

But in the end, I had no choice but to give in and apologize for the sake of my allowance.

What an injustice. Innocent children like me are constantly at the mercy of the adults' heavy-handed logic.

I'd love to find some way to get back at her, but no matter how much a child like me complains, adults never take us seriously. Unless I had a lawyer to represent me, it would be completely useless.

No matter what Mom says, I'm right this time. Even children deserve privacy. I need to find some way to make her understand that…

Ah! That’s right.

There’s one way. Since Zenko’s going to be on that show anyway, I can kill two birds with one stone and do some recon.

Now, where did I put that postcard?

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And so, a few days later.

"Hello, everyone! Welcome to another episode of 'Do You Have Everyday Legal Troubles? The Law Consultation Office Where Sometimes Even a Line Forms.' I’m your host, Shimada Nikaku, the head of this advice center. Thank you for joining us."

Applause erupted from the audience, including me.

Shimada Nikaku. He’s the old guy who used to be a delinquent but has since mellowed out, both in appearance and personality. He’s a staple of this show.

Hinomoto Television, Studio 3.

On this day, I successfully infiltrated the studio.

It was no big deal for someone with my infiltration skills. I simply sent a postcard to the show saying:

"I always enjoy watching your program! I’m a middle school girl who aspires to become a lawyer in the future! Please let me visit your live show sometime!"

Along with a cute picture of myself from a photo booth. That was the key.

These kinds of shows prefer to have girls, especially cute young ones like me, in the audience rather than older women or men. Plus, shows like this love to advertise themselves as "family-friendly educational programming." If a cute middle school girl in uniform wants to visit, there’s no way they’d refuse.

And so, a few days later, I received an invitation to attend the show.

"Now, let’s introduce today’s regular panel of legal advisors. First up, with sharp wit and an even sharper face, it’s lawyer Minamimura!"

"Hello, everyone! Thank you for having me."

Minamimura beamed a big smile as he bowed his head, and more applause followed. He’s the always-smiling lawyer whose motto is "Laughter is essential in law."

"Next, it’s the 'As long as I have food, life is great' lawyer, Fukuyoka!"

"Nice to meet you all. Let’s enjoy life without sweating the small stuff!"

A lawyer who, true to his name (with 'fukuyoka' meaning 'portly'), enjoys gourmet food without worrying about his weight.

"And today, filling in for regular lawyer Marumi, who is recovering from an illness, we have a substitute lawyer. Let me introduce him: the undefeated lawyer who became one at the tender age of twenty-something, and has never lost a case, Zenko Yamashika!"

More applause. I don’t see why a pathetic lawyer like him deserves applause, but I clapped anyway, because, well, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. What an absurdity.

"Thank you."

Even though this was a national TV appearance, Zenko remained expressionless as always, giving only a slight nod. And he had his arms crossed too. The epitome of arrogance.

"Mr. Yamashika, why did you decide to become a lawyer?"

In response to Shimada’s question, Zenko, with his arms still crossed, answered while staring off into the distance.

"It was many decades ago. There was a lawyer. He was determined to become a lawyer with a single-minded desire to protect the dignity and rights of the weak, and he made that dream a reality. After becoming a lawyer, he fought relentlessly against unscrupulous lawyers who trampled on the dignity of the weak for the sake of money, and in the end, he always won. He was later called a 'warrior for human rights' and a 'guardian of the oppressed,' dedicating his life to working tirelessly for people, and his name came to be widely known in later generations."

"I see... What an inspiring story. So, Mr. Yamashika, you were influenced by such a great lawyer, and that’s why you embarked on the path of law?"

"No, I just wanted to be able to boss people around. Is that a problem?"

Thud.

Shimada exaggeratedly pretended to stumble, and laughter erupted from the audience.

Apparently, the audience took that as a joke. They’re being fooled. Everyone’s being fooled...

"Now, let’s move on to our first consultation of the day. This week marks about ten years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in celebration of 'Communism Week,' we’ll be addressing consultations related to communism."

Thud. Zenko slipped off his chair. He managed to fall rather gracefully. Maybe he practiced for this TV appearance.

Still, "Communism Week"? I thought this was a cheap variety show, but they’re handling some pretty interesting topics.

"Now, please watch this reenactment of the case."

This time, the consultation comes from Mr. H, who lives in Tokyo.

"I’m heading out, Manami."

"Take care, darling."

Hiroki and Manami were newlyweds, having been married for just half a year.

They were the envy of everyone, such a loving couple. But Manami had one shocking secret.

It was one Sunday, while Manami was out shopping and Hiroki was home alone.

Wanting to lighten the burden of housework on his beloved wife, Hiroki decided to clean the house. And then—

"Hm? What’s this…?"

Hiroki noticed a cardboard box in the closet that he didn’t recognize.

He opened it to investigate, and inside was a mountain of books, tightly packed!

"W-What's this!"

What he pulled out from the box were books by Marx, Lenin, and Castro. That’s right, all the books were related to communism!

At that moment, his beloved wife returned home.

"I’m back! Oh, honey! What are you looking at!?"

"I should be asking you that, Manami. Explain this. Why are there so many of these books?"

"Well... because..."

"Don’t tell me—are you a communist!?"

Realizing there was no way out, Manami admitted it.

"Y-Yes! And what of it!?"

"Don’t mess with me! When we got married, you told me, 'Lenin is ancient history!' Was that all a lie!?"

"Yes, it was! If capitalism keeps going, the earth will be ruined! The revolution to communism is the only way for humanity to survive!"

"Get a grip! Look at what’s happened to the Soviet Union, or China! Both of them are on the path to capitalism, and that’s why they are where they are today! The idea that communism will save the earth is nothing but a delusion!"

"No! Communism just hasn’t fully matured yet! Sure, Lenin might be in the past, but if we keep reviewing the mistakes of the past and move forward step by step, we’ll definitely reach true communism one day!"

"Anyway! If I had known you were a communist, I never would’ve married you! I’m divorcing you!"

"What!? How can you say such a selfish thing! Fine, if you want a divorce, I’ll give you one! But since you’re divorcing me for your own personal reasons, you’re going to pay alimony!"

"You’ve got to be kidding! You’re the one who hid the fact that you were a communist! There’s no way I’m paying any alimony!"

And so, the two began walking the path toward divorce.

Now, here’s the point of contention:

1. Hiroki is a staunch capitalist and had no intention of marrying a communist.

2. Before marrying Hiroki, Manami had made statements that seemed to deny communism.

So, does Hiroki have to pay alimony?

"I see. Certainly, issues like these might increase in the future. It’s a difficult problem. Now, let’s hear the answers from our three experts. The spouse turns out to be a communist, but the other is a committed capitalist. In the case of a divorce, does alimony need to be paid? Please give us your answers!"

Doo doo doo doo doo, a lighthearted BGM played.

As soon as the music stopped, the panels in front of the three experts lit up, simultaneously displaying the words "Pay" and "Do not pay." And as expected, the audience let out a collective "Ehhh?!"

"Oh, it’s split. Mr. Minamimura says 'Pay,' Mr. Fukuyoka also says 'Pay,' but only Mr. Yamashika says there is no need to pay. Let’s hear from each of you. Mr. Minamimura, does he have to pay alimony?"

"Yes, I believe alimony must be paid. After all, marriage is about two unrelated individuals coming together to share their lives under one roof. It’s only natural that their beliefs would differ. Hiding the fact that she was a communist doesn’t make the marriage unworkable. Therefore, if he wants a divorce, he has to pay alimony."

"I see. Now, Mr. Fukuyoka, you gave the same answer, correct?"

"Yes, this isn’t a valid reason for divorce. Even so, if they do divorce, alimony must be paid. Capitalism has its strengths and weaknesses, and the same goes for communism. Since they were brought together by fate, surely, they can respect each other’s beliefs and work to improve their relationship. So, just because she kept quiet about being a communist doesn’t justify a divorce."

Yes, yes, exactly. There’s no way you can divorce someone just because they kept quiet about being a communist. In fact, having a communist wife should be something anyone would desire.

"Got it. Now, finally, let’s hear from Mr. Yamashika, the only one who said there’s no need to pay alimony. Can this divorce go through?"

Zenko, still with his arms crossed and maintaining his arrogant posture, answered firmly.

"Of course. I’m honestly disappointed with the other two’s interpretations. There’s no need to pay a single cent in alimony."

The audience buzzed with surprise.

"Mr. Yamashika, can you explain your reasoning?"

"Listen. As Hiroki said in the video, looking at modern Russia and China, it's clear that communism is already an outdated, hollow delusion. Anyone who's still steeped in such an ideology is, by that fact alone, outdated. There's no way a marriage could continue under those circumstances, and even if it did, sooner or later, the wife's warped economic views would destroy the household—"

"Cut! Cut! Cut!"

Shimada made a big X sign with his arms.

"Uh, Mr. Yamashika, this is a public broadcast. Could you please phrase things a bit more gently?"

"...Sigh. I thought I was already being pretty restrained."

Zenko looked dissatisfied. Shimada Nikaku seemed even more uneasy after hearing that. By now, the producer must have started realizing they made a mistake in casting. But it was already too late.

"Alright, let's try that again. Mr. Yamashika, is there no need to pay alimony?"

"Of course. I'm honestly disappointed with the other two's interpretations. There's no need to pay a single cent in alimony."

"Could you please explain your reasoning?"

"A marriage is something that stands only with mutual consent from both parties.

The two previous speakers said that a difference in beliefs is not enough reason for divorce, but that varies from person to person. A difference in beliefs can absolutely be a legitimate reason for divorce. Moreover, in this consultation, Hiroki is a staunch capitalist, and his wife knew that, yet she deliberately hid the fact that she was a communist. If I were defending this case, I'd definitely be able to dismiss any alimony claims."

"I-I see."

"Also, think about it. In the real world, the communist bloc and the capitalist bloc engaged in a pointless Cold War for half a century. That conflict dragged in other parts of the world, creating even more pointless struggles everywhere. And in the end, the two sides never reconciled.

Given that, it should be easy to imagine how difficult it would be for a communist wife and a capitalist husband to live in the same household. Maybe things are okay for now, but sooner or later, they'll drag the whole neighborhood into a conflict. So, divorce is a given. In fact, for the sake of the future, this couple should get divorced as soon as possible."

"I-I see. Well, I think we've heard enough, Mr. Yamashika."

Shimada forcefully cut off the explanation. That was another pretty dangerous comment, but well, it'll probably get cut in editing anyway...

In a normal show, this is the part where they'd show the conclusion: something like, "Based on this show's judgment, the likelihood of owing alimony is... XX%," but it seemed they weren't going to display that during this recording. Still, it's probably going to be around 60%, given the two-to-one opinions. Zenko's going to be mad, though.

"Well then, let's move on to the next consultation. Please watch the reenactment."

Once again, the consultation comes from Mr. H, who lives in Tokyo.

It turns out there was more to the story of Hiroki and Manami from earlier.

After finally divorcing Manami, Hiroki visited someone.

That person's name was Daigoro Yamamoto. He was Hiroki's mentor from his university days, and he was also the matchmaker who introduced him to Manami.

"Professor Yamamoto, it's been a while."

Hiroki, visiting Yamamoto's home, was clearly holding back his anger. However, Yamamoto himself had a similar expression.

"...Hiroki, I've heard. You got divorced, didn't you? You're putting me in a difficult position, you know. You can't just go and get divorced so easily. You should have thought about what this does to my reputation as your matchmaker."

"That's *my* line! When you introduced me to Manami, you told me she was a staunch capitalist! That's why I decided to marry her! But she turned out to be a communist. Why did you deceive me!?"

"I-I didn't deceive you! My job was to bring you two together, wasn't it? Why would I say anything that would jeopardize that? That's just what a matchmaker does."

"Matchmaker or not, keeping quiet about something like that is practically fraud! If you had told me from the start that she was a communist, I never would've married her! This is basically fraud, and you're going to take responsibility!"

"What nonsense are you spouting!? You're the one who divorced so easily, and now I'm the one left embarrassed as a matchmaker!"

And then, both of them shouted in unison.

"I'm suing you!"

And just like that, the scene shifted back to the studio.

"I see. This is another situation that could definitely happen in real life. Matchmakers do tend to gloss over the inconvenient details, don't they? Well, let's see what our three experts have to say about this. A couple divorces, and the reason was that the matchmaker hid something inconvenient. Can the matchmaker be held liable for damages? Alright, please give us your answers."

Doo doo doo doo doo, that BGM played again.

Then the panels lit up, and the answers "Can sue" and "Cannot sue" were displayed simultaneously. And right on cue, the audience let out the expected "Ehhh!?"

"Oh, we have a split decision again. Mr. Minamimura says you cannot sue, Mr. Fukuyoka also says you cannot sue, and once again, Mr. Yamashika is the only one with a different answer: he says you can sue. Let's go through the reasons one by one. Mr. Minamimura, can you explain why you think they can't sue for damages?"

"Yes, they cannot. It's common knowledge in society that matchmakers will tell a few white lies or leave out inconvenient details in order to make the match. The job of a matchmaker is to bring the couple together, so of course, they're going to say things that make the match more appealing. In this case, there's no basis for a damages claim, and it doesn't amount to fraud. Also, the decision to divorce or not rests with the couple, so the matchmaker wouldn't be liable for damages."

"I see. Mr. Fukuyoka, do you share this opinion?"

"Yes, I do. If matchmakers disclosed every flaw, no one would ever get married. It's their job to hide the bad parts and emphasize the good. This isn't unique to matchmakers, either. No one is going to voluntarily talk about things that are inconvenient for them. It's quite common for people to get married based on a superficial impression and then discover later that the reality is different.

In the end, marriage is something that can only happen with the consent of both parties. If one person failed to see the other's flaws, that's on them. Whether or not there was a matchmaker involved doesn't change that."

"I see, so you're saying they can't sue for damages. As expected, your words carry weight, Mr. Fukuyoka. Now, finally... let's hear from Mr. Yamashika, the only one who gave a dissenting opinion. Mr. Yamashika, can they sue for damages?"

"Yes, of course they can. Honestly, my disappointment with the other two's opinions has gone beyond disappointment to outright disbelief."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes, listen. I agree that it's common for matchmakers to leave out inconvenient details. On that point, I am in agreement with my colleagues.

However, this case is different. What Mr. Daigoro Yamamoto, the matchmaker in this case, did is akin to smuggling a communist guerilla into mainstream society under the guise of an ordinary person. This is a clear crime. If that communist guerilla were to engage in some terrorist activity in the future, the spouse could easily be implicated in a charge of aiding and abetting a rebellion, or something similar. This is a textbook case of marriage fraud. If a matchmaker simply exaggerates a person's personality or career prospects, that's not a crime. But actively supporting a fraudulent marriage like this is punishable. Naturally, they can sue for damages."

"I-I see," Shimada said, his face twitching slightly. "S-So, in this particular case, they can sue."

"Yes, that's correct."

...Zenko has clearly equated "communist" with "terrorist or guerilla" in his mind. This is a dangerous sign.

"And that concludes the verdict from this legal consultation show. Mr. H from Tokyo, who submitted this case, we hope this can serve as some reference for you."

But how could anyone take that opinion as a reference? Even the host seemed to realize how absurd the situation was, as his face was twitching slightly.

"Well then, let's move on to the final segment of today's show. This is the segment where we take live consultations from the people in the studio: 'Answer me, Mr. Lawyer!' Now, does anyone have a question they'd like to ask?"

It's here.

This show has this kind of segment. And this is precisely the reason I made the effort to come all the way to this studio.

"Yes!"

I raised my hand energetically, pretending to be an innocent middle schooler.

"Oh, we have an enthusiastic young girl here. Let's hear what she has to say."

A microphone was brought to me.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Iyo Satsuki!"

"Well, well, what a cute name. So, little Iyo Satsuki, what's your question?"

"Um, I've been reading all sorts of books about communism, and every time I finish one, I write down what I've learned and my thoughts in a notebook."

The fact that someone my age was reading books about communism must have impressed them. The studio buzzed slightly.

"Then, just the other day, while I wasn't home, my mom went and read my notes without asking. This is totally an invasion of privacy, right? I want you guys to scold her for me!"

"I-I see. That does sound like a potential issue. Well then, let's ask our panelists. Mr. Minamimura, what do you think about this?"

"Well, yes, it depends on the circumstances, but generally speaking, I would say it's an invasion of privacy. Uh, one thing I'd like to ask you, Satsuki—where were you keeping this notebook?"

"Um, under my bed."

"I see. Then that makes it even clearer. If you hid it in a place where it couldn't be found unless someone searched for it, then deliberately going out of their way to find and read it would definitely be an invasion of privacy."

"I see. And what's your take on this, Mr. Fukuyoka?"

"Yes, I basically agree with Mr. Minamimura. However, there's one thing I'd like everyone to keep in mind. In cases like this, age becomes a bit of a sticking point. You see, from a legal standpoint, if the parent's actions are for the purpose of appropriate supervision or education, then certain invasions of privacy may be allowed. That being said, in this case, since the child

was studying communism, which doesn't pose any educational concerns, I'd say the mother is at fault here. The mother should apologize to her daughter."

Alright, just as planned!

My whole family watches this show together. When this episode airs, Mom will have no choice but to apologize to me. Take that!—or so I was thinking, but then I remembered someone crucial.

"Now, let's hear from Mr. Yamashika. What do you think?"

"I have the opposite opinion. I'm honestly disappointed in what my two colleagues have said."

...Not again!

The host's face twitched.

"Uh, what exactly do you mean by that?"

"Listen. It's true, as my colleagues have said, that children have a right to privacy. However, as Mr. Fukuyoka mentioned, parents also have a duty to supervise their children. Mr. Fukuyoka claimed that studying communism doesn't present any educational issues, but that's nonsense. There are plenty of people in the world who have been deceived by the lie that communism is wonderful, only to end up involved in strange terrorist or guerilla activities. What if, hypothetically, your child got corrupted by such strange ideologies and ended up joining a communist guerilla group, causing trouble for others? Parents have a responsibility to educate their children so that they don't become dangerous individuals. Therefore, I would tell this girl's mother to keep a strict eye on her and ensure she doesn't stray down the wrong path."

Ping.

I got pissed. Everything was going so well, and now this pathetic lawyer was going to ruin it all.

"Wha... What are you talking about!? How dare you say something like that without even understanding the true greatness of communism!"

"Oh dear, it seems this young lady is already showing dangerous signs. It seems her parents will need to provide even stricter education."

"Grr! I don't need to hear that from some money-grubbing capitalist lawyer like you!"

"What did you say!? Who are you calling a money-grubbing capitalist!?"

...After that, Zenko and I continued arguing for a while.

"Uh, w-well... Now that we've heard all the opinions, it looks like we're out of time. This has been 'The Law Consultation Office Where Sometimes Even a Line Forms.' We'll see you next week. Goodbye!"

"You better stop badmouthing the great Chairman Mao or karma will get you!"

"Heh! Wasn't it Chairman Mao who starved twenty million people to death during the Cultural Revolution!?"

"That's obviously a lie spread by the West! And what about America!? They start wars every year and kill people!"

"Those aren't wars, they're legitimate economic activities! That's how America's economy works!"

"That's even worse!"

And so, while Zenko and I continued our argument, the producer probably ended the filming with a bitter smile, forcibly pushing the show to a close.

◆

The punchline.

A lot happened, but this was still my TV debut.

Honestly, I didn't want them to air the part where Zenko and I were arguing, but I figured the TV station would cut that part out for me.

So, I was happily waiting for the day the show would air.

But then, one day...

The TV station called Zenko.

"W-What!? What the hell is that!? No one told me about that! What? Too many problematic statements? Hold on a second, what part of that was problematic!? Wait! Hey! Hey!?..."

Zenko, looking utterly defeated, slowly put down the receiver, and I anxiously asked him,

"Z-Zenko, what was that call about?"

"Tch. It’s your fault for spouting all that nonsense. They said there were too many problematic statements, so the episode we filmed isn’t going to air."

"What the hellllllll!"

So much for my festival of fame–it was over and done with...

(The Unreasonable Days of a Certain Communist -- End)

タクティカル・ジャッジメント番外編

影野君の不遇な日々

ハードラック・ハードボイルド・ハートブレイク

不幸で非情な失恋

Tactical Judgment Side Story: Hard-luck, Hard-boiled, Heartbroken Days of Kageno

1

"Hello, this is Kageno Detective Agency. ...Huh? A cheating investigation? I'm sorry, but we don't handle those kinds of investigations. Yes, well, goodbye then."

I slammed the receiver down violently.

Phew. Lately, I haven't been getting any decent requests. According to the calendar, it was already almost spring, but it was still cold, and I couldn't do without the heater. At this rate, I might even have to cut back on my heating expenses.

This place is both my detective agency and my home. It's a room on the second floor of a super rundown apartment, in a district so far from the city center it could be called a slum. You have to boil the tap water to even consider drinking it, and if there were an earthquake, the shaking would definitely feel magnified by one level. The only good thing about this place is the cheap rent. Which, conversely, means there's really nothing else good about it.

I want to make it clear, though, just because my office is a dump doesn't mean my skills as a detective are subpar. Not at all. Seriously.

In the first place, a person working in an outlaw profession like a detective shouldn't be able to set up a big office in a fancy downtown location. If someone did, they're either doing something shady or are just a third-rate detective who's good at finding lost dogs or catching cheaters in the act. Yes, a detective's skill level is inversely proportional to the real estate value of where they live. Truly, a wise saying. That junkie detective who lived on Baker Street is the perfect example.

However, given the location and all, it's unfortunately undeniable that the number of requests I receive is somewhat on the low side.

And to make matters worse, the jobs that do come in are all cheating investigations or lost dog searches. I mean, seriously, can't I get a heart-pounding murder case consultation every once in a while?

...Just as I thought that, I quickly pushed the thought away. It reminded me of a lawyer I knew who was so fed up with divorce mediation that he'd say things like, "Man, I wish there were more murders." I'd rather not be lumped in with someone like that.

Still, it’s a clear fact that my wallet is getting lighter, and all the cases I like have dried up. I’m sick of eating plain pork bowls. At the very least, I’d like to add an egg and some miso soup. At this point, I might just have to swallow my pride and take on a cheating investigation or a lost dog search. There's no way around it, after all—you can’t make money on an empty stomach. If another request comes in, no matter what it is, I’ll take it.

It was just as I was thinking that.

I heard someone clanking up the stairs of my run-down apartment.

A client had arrived.

2

It was quite an unusual pair.

One looked to be about fifty years old, while the other was probably in his mid-sixties. Both wore suits and ties that suited them well. The older one had a somewhat carefree, whimsical air about him, and in about ten years, he’d probably make for a distinguished-looking gentleman, the kind you’d call a charming old man. The other one, though—he was different from your average office worker. He had an imposing presence. His sharp eyes suggested he’d survived many fierce battles and negotiations. A strong, firm jaw that looked like it could move mountains. At the very least, he had to be a department head, if not an executive. He was clearly younger than the other man, but I had no doubt his position was higher.

But for some reason, I felt like I’d seen that nose before.

"This place is even more shabby than I expected."

The more imposing man said that as he looked around the office.

I couldn’t be bothered to argue, since he was absolutely right. But still, it’s not something you say the first time you walk into someone’s office.

"Please, have a seat. Let’s hear what you need."

They were still clients, so I offered them the sofa.

But only the imposing man sat down, while the older gentleman stood behind him, as if that was the natural thing to do. It was an odd sight.

For one thing, it was a weekday, and this was the middle of the afternoon. It’s bizarre for what appeared to be respectable businessmen to barge into a detective agency without an appointment at such a time. Maybe they had some kind of urgent problem.

Even if it wasn’t a personal issue, it wasn’t unheard of for companies to hire a detective agency. They might want to keep tabs on a rival company or investigate an employee’s behavior. But my agency doesn’t advertise much, it looks terrible, and it’s in a bad location. Maybe it was such a secretive matter that they had to visit a detective agency in a place where no one would notice them in broad daylight. That’s one way to look at it, but I’m not that optimistic. If a company really wanted to hire a detective, they’d definitely go to one of the big agencies.

"..."

But something still felt off. This arrogant guy had been staring intently at my face for a while now. Weird. At the very least, I pride myself on not forgetting a face I’ve met before—it's a detective’s trait. And my memory was telling me this was my first time meeting this guy. But it seemed like he knew me...

"Is there something on my face?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. Let me introduce myself first."

The man said, handing me his business card.

The moment I saw that card—my spine froze.

Mitsutomo Trading Company

President and CEO, Hideo Sumibishi

Mitsutomo Trading was a well-known company, one that every job-hunting student would recognize. Probably.

A big company’s CEO. Well, that’s fine. No matter who the client is, I just do my job to the best of my ability. If a sucker arrives ready to be exploited, I’ll gladly take them on.

However, when it comes to that company, and that surname—

"Explain it to him, Baba."

"Understood."

The older man behind him, who had been standing by, handed me his business card while bowing at a perfect thirty-degree angle, just like a proper businessman.

"Lord Kageno, I'm sorry for the late introduction. I am the secretary to President Sumibishi, Kiyoshi Baba. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"...I see."

"Now, as for the reason we're here today... We would like you to find someone for us."

"F-Find someone...?" I had a bad feeling. "Who exactly am I supposed to find?"

"It happened about a week ago. President Sumibishi's daughter, who was attending university, suddenly went missing."

...Someone, please tell me this is a joke.

"And you want me to find her?"

"Yes, exactly."

This was no laughing matter.

I turned to face President Sumibishi and spoke.

"You specifically came all the way to my shabby office, so you must already know what kind of relationship I had with your daughter, don't you?"

"Yes, that's precisely why I'm here."

He answered without anger, without sadness, just matter-of-factly.

Yuzuru Sumibishi. That was the name of his daughter.

Why do I know that name? Of course I know it—she's my ex-girlfriend.

About a year ago, I met her at a mixer organized by a university student I knew... Well, the details of how we met don't really matter right now.

What matters is that, at the time, I was genuinely serious about her. But I had no idea that her father was the president of one of Japan's most famous companies. On top of that, her grandfather had served as a member of the National Diet and even as a cabinet minister.

It took me six months of dating her to learn all that.

She attended a private university so expensive that only the very wealthy could afford the tuition. On top of that, she had a limousine that picked her up and dropped her off. It was almost laughable how much of a sheltered young lady she was.

Thinking back on it now, I'm surprised we were able to go on dates by ourselves. Well, she had a much more active personality than you'd expect from someone with such a sheltered image.

On the other hand, there was me—a wannabe detective, a dropout speeding straight down the road to failure. No one needed to tell me that we were completely incompatible. I've said it already, but I was pretty serious about her. But for her sake, I pulled away on my own.

And now, that very girl—

"...You said she's missing. Are you suggesting she was kidnapped?"

"Of course, that's the most likely possibility," Baba said. "I'm sure you understand the kind of position the president is in."

"I do understand that... but was there a ransom demand?"

"No, not so far."

"Then, have you reported it to the police?"

"Naturally, I've already taken care of that," Hideo Sumibishi said, pursing his lips. "Someone in my position has some connections with the police and the prosecutor's office. We don't know yet who kidnapped my daughter, but I've already filed charges, even though the suspect is unknown. Once we find out who the culprit is, we'll have them thrown in jail immediately."

That's quite an impressive misuse of power.

Kidnapping, unless done for financial gain or a similar reason, is a crime that requires a formal complaint to be filed by the victim or their family—in other words, it's a crime that can't be prosecuted unless the victim or their family presses charges. So, filing charges against an unknown suspect isn't unheard of.

However, unless we're talking about a missing child, it's usually the case that even if the family pleads with the police, they won't take action just because an adult has gone missing. If there were a ransom demand, that would be a different story, but without that, it would most likely be treated as a simple case of running away, and the police wouldn't bother with a proper investigation.

In reality, a significant number of people go missing every year for various reasons. If the police treated every single case as a kidnapping, they'd need to hire about ten thousand more officers, and even that might not be enough. Well, that's precisely why private detectives like me have a chance to make a living. In fact, finding missing people is one of my specialties.

So, even if she was the daughter of a large company's president, in a case like this, where no ransom has been demanded, it's unlikely the police would treat it as a kidnapping. Even if they filed charges against an unknown suspect, they'd probably just say, "We can't accept the charges since there's no evidence to suggest it was a kidnapping," and that would be the end of it.

However, it seems the story changes when the father is the president of a large corporation and the grandfather is a member of the National Diet. Police chiefs are still human, and I'm sure they'd love to receive a parting gift or have help finding a new job when they retire. The police are probably treating this as a kidnapping case, even without any ransom demands.

"If you've already involved the police, why come to me? I'm just one detective—I doubt there's much I can do."

It was Baba, the secretary, who answered my question.

"It's already been a week since the police got involved. Despite that, the situation hasn't improved at all. During this time, the president has been spending his days in unbearable anxiety. And then, we happened to hear about you."

"...I see. You're grasping at straws, huh?"

Hideo Sumibishi clicked his tongue in frustration.

"It's been over a year, but you're still the only man who's ever dated my daughter. You probably know more about her characteristics and social circle than I do, even as her father. You might be able to conduct a better investigation than the police."

"..."

"I'm not grasping at straws. I have a decent amount of faith in you.

Of course, when I first found out that my daughter was dating someone like you, I couldn't hide my anger. I didn't want her associating with an uneducated man who didn't even graduate from a proper university. If you had ever crossed the line with my daughter, I would've used every means to erase you from society."

"...How nice of you."

The scary part is that he didn’t sound like he was joking.

"But when you found out about her position, you voluntarily withdrew, didn’t you? I don’t dislike people who know their place. Besides, my daughter fell for you once, so it would be a problem for me if you were completely incompetent.

I’ve heard that, as a detective, your skills aren’t particularly bad. Especially when it comes to finding people, I’ve been told you’re quite capable. It’s not such a bad thing that my daughter got to know someone like you."

On the surface, it seemed like he was giving me some credit, but I could sense hints of hostility toward me throughout the conversation.

Well, it didn’t matter. I’d known this would happen, which is why I’d pulled away cleanly in the first place.

"...I understand. It’s true that I might be able to help in some way. And regardless of my past relationship with her, I can’t just ignore a woman who might have been kidnapped."

"That’s a satisfactory answer. Now, let’s keep this strictly business for both our sakes. Baba."

Sumibishi turned toward his secretary.

As if on cue, the loyal secretary pulled out a rather thick brown envelope and placed it on the table.

"As a retainer, we will pay you 3 thousand dollars upfront. If you successfully find Lady Yuzuru, we’ll pay you as much as you want—many times that amount."

A 3 thousand dollars retainer. That’s more than twice the going rate. Part of me couldn’t help but wonder if half of it was meant as hush money.

"If that’s not enough, we could offer you a position as a special consultant for our company."

"...I’ll have to decline. I don’t think I’m cut out for court life. But I’m satisfied with this, and I have no reason to refuse the job. I’ll take it."

"Very well, then I leave it in your hands."

Baba bowed his head as he spoke.

But Sumibishi remained the same as ever, sitting with his arms crossed and a stern expression on his face. Not that I cared—I wasn't doing this for a thank you. Without checking the contents, I slipped the envelope into my jacket pocket.

"Now, could you give me a little more detail about the situation?"

"Understood. I'll tell you what we know so far. As I mentioned earlier, Lady Yuzuru went missing from the university. She had a female bodyguard with her at all times, even when she was at school. But according to the bodyguard, Lady Yuzuru disappeared after going to the bathroom."

"Were there any traces left at the scene?"

"Nothing that would lead to the culprit. According to the police investigation, there were no signs of a struggle, either."

"Do you have any idea who might have taken Yuzuru?"

"I'm sorry, but we don't have much information on that. When you're the president of a large company, it's impossible to know how many grudges you've accumulated without realizing it. That's why we've come to you."

"I see. Well, I'll do my best to investigate from here. But... I hate to say this. However, if it really was a kidnapping, and there hasn't been any contact for a week—"

I didn't want to say it either. But as a professional, I had to.

"Please be prepared for the worst."

"...I understand."

Yuzuru's father still refused to abandon his rigid stance.

In truth, I was more than a little shaken.

A woman I once dated had gone missing.

In the end, she's just an ex-girlfriend, and on top of that, we've been out of contact for a while now. You could say she has nothing to do with me anymore. There shouldn't be any lingering feelings left.

But why is that? I guess I'm not old enough to be able to treat this request like just any other job for that reason alone.

Even so, I can't help but think:

It's rare for clients to come into a detective agency. And when they do, it's always these unlucky cases. Did I do something bad to deserve this?

3

It's cold.

Damn cold. Why is it so cold this year?

A detective with no work is barely different from a shut-in, but there's at least one benefit. No matter how damn cold it gets, you can enjoy the luxury of "three meals and an afternoon nap" in a heated room.

But it seems I've indulged in those heavenly days a bit too much. My body doesn't seem used to the cold anymore.

Cold. Anyway, it's cold.

Shivering, I walked through the city's central district—the part with department stores, movie theaters, and all that stuff. My destination was a small alley tucked between the towering buildings of the bustling downtown area.

At the end of the alley was a small shot bar called "Pearl." That's the name of the place. Though, in the middle of the day like this, there's no signboard out yet.

Of course, "shot bar" is just the front. In reality, it operates a certain type of service behind the scenes.

It's an information broker.

They handle all kinds of underground information, and they also buy information sources. When I don't have any jobs, I sometimes introduce civil registry officials who need some extra cash to them, just to make a little money myself.

In detective novels and such, it's common for a bar owner to double as an information broker, but there's nothing strange about that. In fact, it's quite logical. A bar is a place where all sorts of people and information come and go.

As for this particular place, the atmosphere isn't bad. It's a dimly lit, modern establishment with chic chairs and a counter.

And in the case of this bar, regular customers rarely come. Well, it’s not like they never come, but any regular customer who comes once never comes back.

The reason for that becomes immediately clear when you do what I’m about to do—open the plain wooden door with the sign reading “Under Preparation.”

"Hey, can’t you tell by looking? We’re still—Ah."

A deep, gruff voice.

Inside the bar, there was only the bartender behind the counter.

The bartender was a tall, slender middle-aged man, over 180 centimeters tall, with a stylish frame that looked great in a vest.

But as soon as this dandy-looking middle-aged man—who was polishing a glass with practiced hands—caught sight of me—

"Oh my, if it isn’t li'l Kageno! It’s been a while~"

He dropped the act.

As you’ve probably figured out by now, he’s a drag queen.

For a regular customer, realizing that would probably make about 80% of them want to leave. And to top it off, the background music playing in the bar drives the point home.

Picture it: a small shot bar on a lonely backstreet. Inside, rugged men quietly sip their drinks in the dim light. And the background music playing in that bar? A piano version of a children's anime theme song.

That’s right. For some reason, this bartender loves anime songs. And not just any anime, but ones that were popular ten or twenty years ago. I guess he thinks using piano versions makes them fit the bar’s ambiance, but I doubt anyone would stick around to enjoy the atmosphere if *Doraemon*’s theme started playing while they were sipping their drink.

And that’s why any customer who comes here once, lured by the atmosphere, never sets foot in the place again.

By the way, there’s also a famous mystery among us regarding this bartender. According to the civil registry, his real name is “Taro Yamada,” but everyone suspects that’s a fake name. Yet, no matter how much anyone investigates, they’ve never been able to find any other name for him.

But that doesn’t matter to me. What I care about is how much fresh information he can give me.

I quietly sat at the counter in front of the bartender.

"It’s been that long? Hasn’t it only been two weeks?"

"Yes, it’s been two whole weeks! I’ve been so lonely without you. You should come see me more often!"

A middle-aged man talking like a hostess from a cabaret club.

"Well, I’m sure li'l Kageno has his own schedule to keep. So, what brings you here today? It’s daytime, but would you like a drink? If you’re hungry, I can make you a sandwich. Or perhaps... would you prefer... me?"

"..."

"Oh, come on! I’m just kidding! Don’t give me that scary look! Li'l Kageno, that glare of yours is no joke!"

"...Just give me some tea or something."

"Alright, alright. I got it. It must’ve been freezing outside."

Muttering something under his breath, the bartender poured hot water into a ceramic cup from a pot.

"Here you go."

"Wait, this is just hot water!"

"Now that I think about it, li'l Kageno, you’ve racked up quite a tab."

"..."

I silently took a sip.

Ah, the hot water spread through my chilled body.

"Feeling better? Alright then, let’s get down to business. What brings you here?"

Returning to polishing his glass, the bartender resumed his work. If it weren’t for the way he talked, he’d be the perfect image of a bar owner.

"I need to know what you can tell me about Mitsutomo Trading."

"...Oh?"

He stopped polishing his glass.

"Li'l Kageno asking about Mitsutomo Trading at a time like this... Is it related to that missing person case?"

"Your ear is as sharp as ever."

"Well, of course. A missing heiress from a major corporation is prime gossip for people like us. So, li'l Kageno, did you take the case to find her?"

"Pretty much."

"Oh, amazing! I knew you'd take on something like that one day! And now that you've got this big case, wouldn't it be great if you paid off that huge tab of yours too?"

"..."

I pulled out some bills from the brown envelope in my pocket and placed them on the counter.

"Oh, I was only joking, but you're really paying? Isn't this a bit much, though?"

"To me, it's just easy money. Now, tell me what you know. This should cover both the tab and the information, right?"

"Well, I hate to say this after taking your money, but I don't have much info on this case. It's just gossip at this point."

"That so? Well, that's fine. Consider it payment for future updates. Keep it all."

"Thanks, I'll take it then. If you're paying this much, I should've at least made you some coffee."

The bartender took the money without hesitation. But I wasn't complaining—I knew I'd get my money's worth in return. Besides, I don't even like coffee.

"Alright, I'll tell you what I know. As you'd expect, a company as big as Mitsutomo Trading has probably made plenty of enemies. If a desperate small business decided to kidnap the daughter to sabotage or blackmail the company, it wouldn't be surprising. But listen, li'l Kageno. Lately, I haven't heard anything about any companies acting suspiciously enough to plan a kidnapping."

Suspicious behavior.

Big corporations have money. And they use that money to silence the media and get away with some pretty outrageous things. Take, for example, the pachinko industry—it's notorious. There was once a case where a truck rammed into a pachinko parlor as an act of harassment. But pachinko is one of Japan's biggest entertainment industries, and a lot of money was involved. So, in the end, the news never got out to the public.

However, if some company were seriously going to carry out harassment like a kidnapping or ramming a truck into a building, they would certainly hire specialized personnel. The quickest way to do that is to borrow people from the yakuza. The advantage of hiring outsiders is that if things go south and the operation is exposed, they can easily cut ties with them.

But if there were any job requests circulating in the underground world, this bartender would have heard about it. And this time, there's been nothing.

In other words—

"If she was really kidnapped, then it's more likely to be on a personal level, not corporate."

"That's a more plausible story. After all, the daughter of the president of Mitsutomo Trading is famous as a well-bred young lady in high society."

...She was certainly beautiful, but "well-bred young lady" wasn't exactly the image I had of her.

In any case, this wasn't good news for me.

As far as I know, Yuzuru's family hasn't received any ransom demands yet.

So, if this really is a kidnapping and the target isn't Mitsutomo Trading as a company, but rather Yuzuru Sumibishi as an individual—

It's already been a week since the incident. Who knows what might have happened to her at that time. Imagining the worst-case scenario, I hurriedly shook the thought out of my head.

"I see. That's enough for now. At least it gives me a starting point for the investigation."

I downed the remaining hot water in my glass, thanked the bartender, and left the bar.

4

It's cold.

Damn cold. Why is it so cold? Spring should be just around the corner by now.

After leaving “Pearl,” I headed to investigate the university Yuzuru attended. By the time I finished, the sun had mostly set, and the cold had intensified even more.

The university was called Kannan Private University. It’s a school built for the sons and daughters of Japan’s elite corporations, a place that I have absolutely no connection to. While it’s co-ed, it’s probably designed so that only the children of famous companies can mingle and marry each other, not people like me.

In terms of academic standards, it’s nowhere near the level of schools like Tokyo University or Kyoto University, but they’ve poured an obscene amount of money into its facilities. Graduating from here is said to serve as proof of wealth in itself. And the security is so strict it’s practically insane. The massive campus is surrounded by high walls like a prison, and even from outside the gates, you can see guards keeping a close eye on everything.

The result of my investigation at such a university? Let’s just say it wasn’t very fruitful.

Apparently, Yuzuru disappeared after going to the restroom at the university.

I knew she commuted to school in a limousine—that much I was aware of. No, to be precise, that’s something I found out during our time together, and it’s part of the reason we broke up.

Moreover, from what I learned today during my inquiries at the university, Yuzuru had a female bodyguard with her almost constantly, even inside the campus. By the way, it’s a wonder how she managed to date me at all, given that situation.

The bodyguard, also a woman, couldn’t accompany her into the restroom, and it seems that’s when the culprit struck.

In the end, that was about all the information I could gather. Yuzuru didn’t seem to have an especially wide social circle, though she did have a few close friends. But none of them had anything particularly new to say about the incident, and I couldn’t gather much useful information.

The university’s security was extremely tight. Perhaps because I, with my less-than-innocent demeanor, was loitering around the campus, I almost got caught by the guards. And that was despite the fact that I wasn’t even inside the campus, just gathering information outside. If I hadn’t had the business card from the president of Mitsutomo Trading, they might have handed me over to the police.

From that perspective, this crime must have been meticulously planned. At first glance, there didn’t seem to be any openings for a kidnapper to exploit. Yet in reality, Yuzuru vanished in what appeared to be a carefully timed strike. Given the circumstances, it would be impossible to abduct her without intimate knowledge of her recent activities.

That means the suspicious parties could be her relatives, her bodyguard, university staff, or her friends...

No, that's no good. This isn't narrowing it down at all. There's still too little information to work with.

Just then, as if sensing that my investigation had hit a dead end, the inner pocket of my jacket suddenly vibrated.

It was my phone.

When I pulled it out and checked the screen, I saw an unregistered number. It wasn't a blocked number, but it wasn't in my contacts either.

Well, at least it wasn't a one-ring scam. No reason not to answer. I pressed the call button.

"Who is this?"

"That's a rather brusque question to start with, isn't it?"

It was a slightly aged man's voice, speaking in a calm, measured tone.

I recognized it. It was the voice of the secretary to Mitsutomo Trading's president—a man named Baba, who always had a somewhat aloof and carefree demeanor.

"It's you. What do you want?"

"I thought I'd inquire about the progress of your investigation. How are things coming along?"

"Slowly but surely."

"That's a rather unenthusiastic response."

"I feel like I might have made some progress, but looking at the bigger picture, I'd have to say there's still a long way to go."

"That's a rather ambiguous answer."

"...What do you expect me to say?"

"I'm not the one you should be asking."

"...Can I hang up now?"

“Lord Kageno, I do believe that impatience shortens one’s lifespan.”

“Tell that to your boss. Goodbye.”

“Please, wait a moment. I’d like to get to the main point.”

“…”

Calm down. He’s involved in the case, too. There’s a chance—however slim—that he might have some valuable information. I shouldn’t hang up out of frustration.

“Hello? Lord Kageno? Are you still there?”

“...Just get to the point.”

“Very well. It’s about the president...”

“The president? What about him?”

“As you’re aware, he’s the head of a major corporation that essentially supports Japan’s economy, overseeing thousands of employees. On top of his usual workload, he’s now dealing with this incident. While he appears calm on the surface, it seems the stress is really starting to take a toll on him.”

“I can imagine. So?”

“I must apologize for the unreasonable request, but I ask that you find Lady Yuzuru as quickly as possible. That is all I wished to say.”

That’s it? Not even a scrap of useful information?

Well, I guess you could call it encouragement. Hanging up in anger would be rude.

“I’ll do my best. That’s all I can say.”

“That’s more than enough. We appreciate it. Please continue the investigation.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I was about to hang up when a thought struck me, and I quickly added:

“Oh, by the way, there’s something I’d like to ask.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“I want to see Yuzuru’s room. Can you arrange that?”

“I see. That does seem necessary. I’ll send a car to your office tomorrow morning around nine. Will that work for you?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Understood. I’ll make the arrangements. Goodbye.”

Finally, the call ended.

At this point, there’s just too little information to make any real deductions. For now, the best I can do is get some dinner, clear my head, and prepare for tomorrow.

Even though I can’t help but worry about what might be happening to Yuzuru right now, there’s nothing I can do by rushing things.

I decided to call it a day and make my way back to my office, which also serves as my home, to get some rest.

5

I was dreaming.

It doesn’t happen often, but sometimes I’m aware that I’m dreaming while I’m still in the dream.

This was one of those times. I had just lain down on the sofa a moment ago, but now it felt as if I were watching an image in front of me, no different from when I was awake.

In the center of the scene, moving around, was Yuzuru.

It must have been because of what happened during the day. Memories of the past were resurfacing.

Her semi-long, silky black hair. Her slender figure, her large, round eyes, and her lively pink lips that moved expressively, even without makeup. Even now, I can easily recall Yuzuru just by closing my eyes.

Her personality didn’t quite match the image of a well-bred young lady. She was energetic and active. The reason we got together was because she was the one who said, “Why don’t we go out?” Most of the time, she was the one who decided where we went on dates.

At first, I was just being swept along, but in time, I found myself truly drawn to Yuzuru's carefree nature.

At least, until I learned the truth about her family.

"Let's break up."

That day, I was the one who brought it up.

"You've got to be joking, right? What are you suddenly talking about?"

Yuzuru tried to laugh it off, but it didn't take long for her expression to freeze when she realized I was serious.

"No, I'm serious. I'm just a poor detective who can barely make ends meet. I have no prospect for a better future. Even if we keep going out, I don't think I can make you happy."

...After that, I don't really remember much of the argument.

I kept saying, "I can't make you happy," and she kept saying, "That's not true, it doesn't matter what kind of family I come from." And so on, back and forth like that.

But I do remember one thing Yuzuru said while crying.

"Why!? Is my family really that big of a problem!? Then why don't you just take me away and elope with me!"

Of course, I had thought about that. But there was no way I could actually go through with it, not when it meant making an enemy of one of Japan's most powerful companies. As an excuse, I'll say I had my reasons. If they threw enough money at it, hiring a private investigator to find a runaway couple would be easy. I knew that all too well because of the line of work I was in.

But now that I think about it, I can't say for sure that was the right choice. Why was I worrying about the consequences of a failed elopement before even trying it?

Yuzuru must have realized that staying with a coward like me wasn't worth it.

"Fine! I didn't think you were such a spineless person! Fine, let's break up!"

...And so, things ended exactly the way I wanted them to. But Yuzuru had one last condition.

“Fine, let’s break up. But let’s go on one last date. You can at least give me one more memory, can’t you?”

I couldn’t refuse. After all, I still had lingering feelings for her.

For some reason, our last date was at an amusement park. Well, since we didn’t have to talk while on the rides, and we could just chat about the rides afterward, it wasn’t a bad choice.

The problem came afterward.

After dinner, Yuzuru said she wanted to go to my office. When the girl I was in love with requested something for the last time, I couldn’t say no.

And—once we arrived at the office, Yuzuru started undressing before I could even stop her.

I’ll never forget that moment.

Her white skin was accentuated by a black bra, undergarments, a garter belt, and stockings. No, “undergarments” sounds too plain; let’s call them “panties” for the sake of it being a bit more sensual.

The bra and panties were clearly designed for the sole purpose of seducing a man, with very little fabric to cover her.

The curves of Yuzuru’s ample breasts and slender waist, which I could only imagine through her clothes before, now unavoidably provoked my primal instincts.

“Please... just this once, give me a memory. Let me carve you into my heart...”

Yuzuru, her face red with embarrassment, pressed herself against me—

And that’s when I woke up.

“...Tch, damn it.”

I sat up from the sofa, which served as my bed, and squinted at the sunlight mercilessly pouring in through the window.

Of all the dreams to have, why that one? Worst. Wake-up. Ever. If I close my eyes, the remnants of the dream seem like they'll rise up in the back of my mind again.

Pathetic. Yuzuru is a woman from my past. I'm not supposed to have any lingering feelings.

Whether I wanted to or not, the memory of how pathetic I was back then resurfaced. At that time, I mustered every bit of willpower I had and resisted her temptation. I had shamed myself as a man.

Of course, I had my reasons. I was the one trying to walk away, after all. I hate to put it this way, but I didn't want to ruin Yuzuru at the very end. Though, looking back now, I'm sure I hurt her enough in a different way.

But to remember it all so vividly at a time like this...

...Forget it.

I slapped my face with a sharp smack.

Ah, ah, it's a bright and sunny day today.

Alright, that's it. Now I've forgotten about the dream. Time to get back to my usual routine.

I stood up from the sofa and turned on the TV. The clock displayed on the screen read 7:30 AM. I had slept for over eight hours. I've long since gotten used to sleeping on the sofa, and thanks to a good night's rest, I didn't feel any lingering fatigue from the day before. A single, big stretch was enough to wake my body up.

After freshening up in the bathroom, I had a simple breakfast of a boiled egg, a banana, cornflakes with milk, and coffee. Naturally, the egg was hard-boiled, not soft. Not that it really matters.

As I was going about my morning routine, the clock on the TV showed 8:50. The car to take me to the Sumibishi residence would be arriving soon.

I threw on my usual wrinkled coat, opened the door—and, as usual, I was greeted by a blast of frigid air, which made me wince.

Shaking off the temptation, unique to self-employed people, to declare today a "temporary closure" and stay holed up indoors all day, I braced against the cold and descended the stairs of my apartment. Thankfully, the car had already arrived. A Mercedes parked in front of this shabby apartment building? Yeah, that was definitely my ride.

"Lord Kageno, correct?"

The person leaning out of the driver's seat was a woman. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, with a slim build, short hair, and wearing slacks instead of a skirt. She had an air of confidence about her.

However, there was something bothering me. I sensed a shadow hanging over her expression, as if something bad had happened recently.

"Yeah, that's me. And you are?"

"I'm Yuki Kawaguchi. I've been instructed to take you to the Sumibishi estate. Please, get in."

She went out of her way to step outside and open the back seat door for me. I thought it might be more convenient if they installed automatic doors like a taxi, but maybe that would take away from the personal touch.

Once I got in, the woman who introduced herself as Kawaguchi returned to the driver's seat and started the car.

"We'll be on our way. It'll take about thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes, huh? Plenty of time to talk, then."

"Huh? With me... you mean?"

"Yeah, let me ask you a few things. By any chance, was it that old man, Baba, who specifically sent you to pick me up?"

"Uh, yes, that's right..."

"I see. Just as I thought. So you're not just any driver, are you? Could it be you were Yuzuru Sumibishi's bodyguard?"

Her reflection in the mirror showed she couldn't hide her surprise.

"Yes... that's certainly true... But how did you know that?"

"It's nothing special. There aren't many young women who work as drivers. So, it's more likely that you were assigned as a driver for a special reason this time. Given the situation, the only woman who would have any business with me now would likely be Yuzuru Sumibishi's bodyguard, whom I've heard about."

"I-I see. As expected of a detective."

More than anything, I thought the shadow on her expression might be because she had recently screwed something up—but I kept that to myself.

"Alright, let’s continue with the questions. You were guarding Yuzuru at the university, right?"

"Yes, that’s right. There were other guards, but I was the only one who guarded her inside the university. I didn’t look too out of place as a student, after all. Before that, the bodyguards only accompanied her on her commute, but apparently, Lady Yuzuru started being followed around by some unknown man, so after that, I stayed by her side even inside the university."

"What?"

A stalker? This is some interesting information.

"When did this man start following her around?"

"I heard it was from around last winter to the summer."

"Last winter to summer...?"

Wait, that’s about me!

It seems I really wasn’t seen as a man worthy of Yuzuru. Well, that much was obvious from her father’s attitude when he came to my office. But to think that my presence led to her needing a bodyguard even inside the university... I don’t feel like I should be blamed, but I do feel slightly guilty.

"Um, is something the matter? You’re making a face like you’ve swallowed something bitter."

"Don’t worry about it. More importantly, let me confirm something. I’ve already heard some things from the university, but Yuzuru said she was going to the restroom and left your side, right? And then she just disappeared. Is that all correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"Can you tell me more about what happened at that time?"

"I don’t mind, but there’s not much to tell. That day, we were about to head home after her lecture at the university, and Lady Yuzuru said she needed to use the restroom. So, I waited at the entrance to the restroom, but..."

"And then she never came back."

"Exactly... If only I had insisted on going with her... Lady Yuzuru didn't like it when I followed her to the restroom..."

Kawaguchi let out a sigh and slumped her shoulders, as if recalling that moment. I wished she wouldn't do that while driving; it's dangerous.

But fortunately, her driving remained steady.

"Well, no one likes having a bodyguard follow them to the bathroom. It's not entirely your fault, so don't beat yourself up over it."

"Thank you..."

She probably took my words as mere courtesy, but I could tell she was still feeling down. The only time the shadow over her face would lift was when Yuzuru returned safe and sound.

"How long after Yuzuru went to the restroom did you start looking for her?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes... How many entrances were there to the restroom? I doubt there were more than two."

"There was only one entrance. But there was a window, and it would have been easy to slip in and out through it. It was on the first floor."

"I see."

When I visited the university yesterday, I was eyed with suspicion at the gate, and there was no way they were going to let me inspect the crime scene. On top of that, it was the women's restroom. But given the situation, I might need to take a direct look. Should I rely on Mitsutomo Trading's influence? ...No, I don't want to go to the trouble of looking into the women's restroom—no, I mean, I don't need to see it that badly.

Still, abducting a woman from a restroom in just fifteen minutes... It seems like they had enough time, but there was a bodyguard just outside the door. If Yuzuru had screamed even once, it would've been over.

Well, maybe they silenced her somehow. But even for a small woman, carrying someone out through a window isn't easy. And a restroom is a place where anyone could walk in at any moment, so the culprit would have had to stay alert for witnesses too.

...Wait a minute. That’s not all. Even if the culprit had prepared to abduct Yuzuru in the restroom, there’s no guarantee Yuzuru would have gone to the restroom at that exact time. Would they really have chosen such an uncertain place for a kidnapping?

"Hey, Yuzuru didn’t go to the restroom at a fixed time every day, did she?"

"No, of course not. Except for when she woke up in the morning, that is."

Yeah, that makes sense.

The number of culprits is another issue. It wouldn’t just take one person to both watch the scene and abduct Yuzuru. There would need to be at least two, preferably three. And one of them would have to be a young woman who could easily slip in and out of the restroom. Otherwise, it would be impossible to watch for the right moment to strike.

Hmm, it’s becoming more and more confusing. If they were trying to abduct her without the bodyguard noticing, they’d need a meticulously planned operation. But from what I’ve heard, it seems more like there was an element of spontaneity involved.

...Maybe I need to think about this differently. What if, for example, someone was doing something suspicious in the women’s restroom, and Yuzuru happened to witness it, and they kidnapped her to keep her quiet? Smoking... wouldn’t be enough to trigger a kidnapping, but in this day and age, maybe something like a drug deal in the university restroom could happen. It’s a university attended by rich kids, so they’d be sensitive to scandals like that.

As I thought, something smells fishy about the crime scene. Then again, it is a restroom.

"Lord Kageno, is there anything else?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, that’s enough for now. Thanks to you, I’ve learned a lot."

"I’m glad to hear that. Please, find Lady Yuzuru and bring her back safely."

I took another close look at this driver, Kawaguchi. She had a fine face. And to be chosen as the bodyguard for the daughter of Mitsutomo Trading at her age, she must have some serious skills.

"I’ll do everything I can."

That was the only answer I could give for now.

But in my mind, a certain hypothesis was beginning to take shape.

I had a bad feeling about this. Yuzuru was already a woman with no connection to me. But the fact we had once been involved was undeniable, and maybe—just maybe—this could lead to the worst possible outcome for me.

6

After that, there was no further conversation, and the car left the urban area and entered a residential district. This was a so-called upscale neighborhood, lined with large houses complete with gardens.

We arrived at the Sumibishi estate after driving for another five minutes.

It was, after all, the home of the president of one of Japan’s most prestigious companies. I had expected it to be large.

But it exceeded my expectations. Even in this upscale neighborhood, it stood out with its sprawling grounds. It wasn’t tall, but it was massive. The width of the building alone must have been around 300 meters. The garden didn’t look very large compared to the size of the mansion, but this was prime real estate. I couldn’t even begin to guess how much it was worth.

"Lord Kageno, I’ll be back to pick you up when you’re ready to leave."

After dropping me off in front of the entrance, Kawaguchi leaned out of the driver’s seat.

"Thanks."

After I thanked her, the car moved off to the side of the property. There must have been a garage in the back.

"Welcome, Lord Kageno. How is the investigation progressing?"

The one who came to greet me in her place was the sly secretary, Kiyoshi Baba.

"It’s only been a night since I reported in yesterday. There’s been no progress."

"Quite right. Well then, shall I guide you inside the mansion?"

"Hold on. I want to ask you something first."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"You’re the president's secretary, right? Secretaries are supposed to stay by the president’s side, aren’t they? So why is someone of your rank personally escorting me? Couldn’t anyone else do it?"

"Ah, I see your point. But don’t worry, we have other secretaries as well. Besides, I’m sure the president prefers the company of a secretary in glasses bursting with youth over an old man like myself."

Bursting with youth... What an archaic expression.

"I don’t think that’s appropriate, given that we don’t even know if his daughter’s been kidnapped."

"You’re absolutely right, I apologize for saying something so pointless. Please, forget I said anything. However, I’d like to keep this just between us, but the truth is, it was I who strongly recommended bringing you in for this case, Lord Kageno. The president was initially opposed to the idea, but I insisted. As a result, I’ve been tasked with handling all matters related to Lord Kageno in this case."

"I didn’t know that. So, what, does that mean I should thank you or something? Regardless of how it happened, you did introduce me to a job that pays well."

"Ha-ha-ha, surely you’re joking. Hearing a thank-you that’s completely devoid of sincerity wouldn’t make me happy in the least. Well, unless Lord Kageno were a much younger and prettier lady."

"... I don’t feel like arguing with you, but I’ll at least protest. I’m still 23, you know. I think that qualifies me as young."

"Oh, that’s right, I’d completely forgotten. You certainly don’t look it."

... That’s something I get told so often, I can’t even argue.

But now I think I understand why this old man is the secretary to the president of such a large company. His blunt honesty must be highly valued.

"... Let’s get back on topic. Speaking of which, I hear you’re the one who selected that woman as my driver."

"Yes, that’s correct. I thought it best that you meet with all the relevant parties during your investigation."

There was indeed some value in that. But for some reason, I didn’t feel like thanking this old man, so I kept silent.

"Oh, it’s quite cold to stand around talking like this. Allow me to show you to Lady Yuzuru’s room."

"Yeah, please do."

Just as we were about to enter the large mansion—

The grand front door opened by itself. Of course, it hadn't actually opened on its own. A girl—no, a young woman—had come out from inside.

She looked like a high school student. Long hair, a healthy complexion, a plain white blouse paired with a cardigan, and a long skirt. The kind of outfit that would make anyone think, "Yes, she's definitely a young lady." But who was she?

The girl walked over to us, glanced at my face, then turned to the old man and spoke.

"Mister Baba, is this the guy?"

"This is Lady Yuka. Yes, that's correct, but..."

"Oh, so this is the one I've heard about... Interesting, hmm..."

The girl, who'd been called Yuka, looked me over with great curiosity. Am I some sort of rare animal? Well, maybe detectives are something similar.

"Hey, old man. Who is this girl?"

"Huh? This is Lady Yuka."

"No, that's not what I meant. She's not your granddaughter or something, right? Is she a relative of Yuzuru's?"

"What are you talking about? Lady Yuka is Lady Yuzuru's younger sister."

"..."

What!?

"What did you say, a younger sister!? Yuzuru has a younger sister!?"

"... You've been investigating my sister, and you didn't even know that?"

The girl named Yuka spoke, clearly unable to hide her surprise. I suppose I should be grateful she wasn't outright disgusted.

"Oh, my apologies. Now that you mention it, I didn't think it was necessary, so I didn't tell you anything about Lady Yuka."

"... No, that's not something you need to apologize for. It's my mistake for not knowing something so basic."

"I see. Well, if you'd like, I can prepare some materials on Lady Yuka before you leave."

"What!? No way, that's not happening! That would be a complete invasion of my privacy! And what exactly would those materials even say about me!?"

She's got some spunk. Now that I'm looking closely, she does resemble Yuzuru.

"... Old man, don't bother preparing any materials on her."

"Oh, thank you! You really are a gentleman, just as I'd expect from a detective."

The girl smiled brightly. I still didn't understand how being a detective and being a gentleman were supposed to be related.

But I was shocked. Yuzuru never talked about her family at all. I wasn't about to pry into someone's personal life, so I hadn't pushed her on it. But yesterday, I'd been asking around about Yuzuru everywhere. Yet, I hadn't heard a single word about her having a younger sister. How could I call myself a detective when I hadn't even known about her family structure? That should have been the first thing I looked into.

Still, the fact that I hadn't come across any mention of a younger sister during all my inquiries could mean that this girl had absolutely no connection to the case. Maybe I'm just trying to console myself.

"Well then, Lord Kageno, I'll go ahead and show you to the room."

"Oh, wait, Mister Baba. I'll take him to my sister's room. Is that okay?"

"Huh? Well, I don't mind, but..."

"Great, it's settled. Let's go, detective."

"..."

Before I knew it, the girl had grabbed my arm and was pulling me along. I couldn't think of any reason to refuse, so I let her lead me. Baba gave me a polite bow as I was dragged away.

Well, it’s her sister’s room after all. She probably doesn’t want too many men poking around in it.

◆

"This is my sister’s room. Even though she’s not here right now, I’d prefer if you didn’t stare around too much."

It was a large room on the second floor facing south. This was Yuzuru’s room.

It was bigger than my office, cleaner than my office, and more organized than my office. But that’s all to be expected, so none of that really matters.

Other than that, it was a pretty typical girl’s room. A bed, a desk, a chair, bookshelves, stuffed animals, little knick-knacks, posters, a TV, a VCR, and an expensive stereo set.

I looked around the room, but of course, I didn’t find anything that might be connected to the case.

... Hmm. But something was bothering me.

I could feel a pair of eyes constantly watching me as I walked around the room.

Unable to endure it any longer, I turned to the girl behind me.

"Hey, Yuka, right? There’s something I want to ask."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Are you here to keep an eye on me?"

"N-No, not at all! I’m just curious about what detectives do."

"Let’s go with that, then. But just so you know, detectives don’t crawl on the ground with magnifying glasses or tap on walls to find secret rooms. There’s nothing interesting to see."

"That’s fine with me."

"Alright, do what you want. But don’t interrupt me. The only time you’re allowed to speak is when I ask you a question. Got it?"

"Yeah, I understand. But if that’s the case, there’s just one thing I want to ask first."

"What?"

"Why did you break up with my sister?"

...I felt light-headed.

Well, of course. It wouldn't be strange if she'd heard about me from Yuzuru. Or maybe from that old man. But I had no intention of answering her.

"Either leave the room right now, or keep quiet until I say otherwise. Your choice."

"... Coward."

"Yeah, that's the correct answer."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"Nothing. Just hurry up and choose: stay silent or leave."

"Fine, I get it."

She pouted and fell silent. That sulky expression was exactly like Yuzuru's.

Still, this was one extravagant room. The floor was covered with plush carpeting, and the ceiling light was one of those rare chandeliers.

Even just the desk was expensive, made of mahogany or something. I wondered if selling off every piece of furniture in my office would even be enough to buy this desk.

On top of the desk was a computer. Of course, it wasn't just any computer. The keyboard and mouse were made of wood for some reason. Was it custom-made? It really made me feel like it was a miracle that someone as poor as me had ever ended up dating Yuzuru.

"Is something wrong?"

Yuka spoke up, probably because I'd been silently looking around the room for a while.

"No, it's nothing."

I was distracted by the opulence of the room. If I had honestly admitted that, the way this girl looked at me would have definitely changed—for the worse, without a doubt.

However... After taking a good look around the room, I still didn't find anything new. The police must have already conducted a considerable search, so it's not like I was expecting any groundbreaking discoveries.

That said, I've started to form a hypothesis about this case.

There's something in this room that can easily prove my theory.

The dresser.

Relying on my male intuition, I opened the bottom drawer.

"Ah, wait, not there...!"

Yuka raised her voice in surprise, confirming that what I expected was indeed inside.

Underwear.

I rummaged through it carelessly.

"H-Hey, what are you doing?!"

"You can see for yourself. I'm checking the drawer that contains women's underwear."

"S-Stop it! Are you some kind of pervert?!"

Sigh...

I shot a sideways glance at Yuka.

"Get out. You're in the way."

"!"

Maybe because I sounded a bit serious, Yuka shrank back in fear.

"I know exactly how this looks, and I'm not into strange fetishes. I'm doing this because it's necessary. I don't need to be called a pervert for doing my job. My mistake was letting you stay here. Just get out."

"I-I'm sorry... I didn't mean..."

Perhaps overwhelmed by my words, she apologized with a frightened expression.

The feel of silk underwear is kind of nice, and it smells good too—though, of course, that's a secret I'll never admit to anyone.

"Then just shut up and watch. I told you the only time you're allowed to talk is when I ask you a question."

"Yes, I'm sorry..."

She hung her head dejectedly. If this girl had the ability to read people's minds, she might have learned a valuable lesson about not taking everything adults say at face value.

I resumed rummaging through the underwear. But what was left was all plain, ordinary stuff.

Yes, unlike the black underwear I had seen in my dream this morning—it wasn't here.

"Is this all the underwear Yuzuru has?"

"No, there's more in the upper drawer..."

As expected of a rich girl. She had quite the collection of underwear.

While trying to ignore Yuka's piercing gaze, I carefully examined the shelf above and confirmed that the black underwear was indeed missing.

Just as I thought. Whether that's fortunate or unfortunate, I don't know.

Next, I should check—probably this.

"Yuzuru used the computer, didn't she?"

"Yeah. She even taught me a lot. She used it for things like the internet and drawing."

Then it's definitely worth looking into.

I powered up the computer. I wasn't sure of the exact version, but it was a common operating system that could be found everywhere.

There wasn't any password protection. Well, for an average user, that's probably normal.

I started operating the computer using the mouse. It was quite a high-performance machine. Naturally, it was always connected to the internet... though I had to question why their provider was AOF, the generic kind. The hard drive had 160 gigabytes, but only about a quarter of it was in use.

The first thing to check was the internet browsing history. When you visit websites, data like images from that site are temporarily downloaded to the visitor's computer. This helps lighten the load when revisiting the same site.

Depending on the settings, this history can remain on your hard drive for quite a long time if there's enough storage space.

But when I checked, oddly enough, all that data had been erased. It's possible the settings were adjusted not to save history, but... upon checking, there was no sign of such settings. So, it's safe to assume someone intentionally deleted it. After all, browsing history can be cleared with the click of a button. The question is, who deleted it at the exact time Yuzuru went missing?

To solve that mystery, I launched the email client. If all the emails had been erased too—

But my concern was unnecessary. All the emails were still there.

There were quite a lot. Around four thousand messages.

"Yuzuru's been using the internet for about three years, right? She said she bought the computer after starting university."

"Yeah, that's about right."

Well, after three years on the internet, accumulating around four thousand emails isn't surprising.

I pulled out one of a detective's seven essential tools—a blank CD—from my pocket. Not so long ago, this might've been unnecessary, but nowadays, you can't be a detective without carrying one of these. Or so I believe.

"What's that?"

"A blank CD. I'm going to burn some data onto it."

"Wow."

I operated the email client, exporting all the emails and the address book. By burning the files onto a CD, I could examine Yuzuru's email exchanges on another computer. These days, almost any computer can burn CDs, so it's incredibly convenient.

"Alright, that should do it. I'm heading out."

"Huh, you're done already?"

“Yeah, I’ve achieved my goal.”

“Oh... that’s a shame. I wanted to see more...”

She looked genuinely disappointed. But I didn’t feel any obligation to indulge her, so I decided to leave her in the room and make my exit.

“Well, see you. Thanks for your help.”

“Wait a minute. Just one last thing...”

“...What is it?”

“Please... take care of my sister. If something happens to her, I...”

It was the first time this girl showed such a humble attitude.

However, probably because I’d seen her so lively and energetic earlier, I couldn’t help but feel like she was putting on a show. Maybe I’m just a cynical person.

“Don’t worry. Your sister is probably fine.”

Leaving those words behind, I exited the room without waiting for her response.

◆

“Lord Kageno.”

“Whoa!”

As soon as I descended to the first floor, Baba, the old man, suddenly appeared, startling me.

“Don’t just pop up like that! You scared the hell out of me!”

“My apologies, Lord Kageno. Sometimes I just feel the urge to return to my boyish ways. But your last remark slightly wounded me.”

“Sorry, but I’m not taking it back. So, what do you want? If you say you were just trying to scare me, I’ll kick you.”

“Well, actually, Detective Iwamoto, who is in charge of Lady Yuzuru’s case, just arrived. Would you like to meet him?”

Iwamoto. I know a few detectives, but the name didn't ring a bell.

Well, despite Yuzuru being the daughter of a major company's president, there hasn't been a ransom demand, and it's still unclear whether she ran away or was kidnapped. Normally, the police wouldn't even get involved in a case like this. And the fact that he's been investigating for over a week with no results suggests he's not exactly competent.

I doubted I'd gain much from meeting him, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to at least see his face.

"I'll meet him."

"Very well, this way."

I was led to a waiting room on the first floor. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that this house has a waiting room.

And there—there was no one who remotely resembled the kind of detective I had imagined.

"Well, well. So, you're that shady detective named Kageno, huh?"

...A pig spoke.

My first impression was that of a lump of flesh. His belly sagged, his chin had a scruffy beard, and his teeth were yellow. He stood about 160 centimeters tall, and his balding head reflected the sunlight streaming in from the window. His round, bloated body was barely held in place by suspenders pulling up his wrinkled trousers because a belt simply couldn't contain his shape.

"Hey, aren't you going to say something?"

His arrogant voice. The thought of having to converse with this man—and something resembling a pig—made me feel my spirit deflate.

"Are you Iwamoto?"

"Hmph, this is why young people today are so useless. Don't you know how to speak respectfully to your elders?"

"I don't feel the need to show any respect to a pig in human skin who calls me shady."

"W-What did you just say!? Are you trying to insult an officer of the law!?"

"If that sounded like a compliment to you, then I suggest you retake elementary school. That is, if there's a school that will allow pigs to enroll."

The pig turned into a boiled pig.

"I'll arrest you for the crime of insulting an officer! Put your hands out!"

"Mr. Iwamoto, please refrain from causing any trouble in this estate."

Baba, the old man, soothed him in his usual nonchalant tone. It seemed the pig detective was afraid of the power of Mitsutomo Corporation, and the boiled pig quickly cooled back down to a normal pig.

"Hmph, fine. From what I hear, you're involved in this case, but a third-rate detective like you has no business here. You'd better back off before you embarrass yourself."

What a hassle. First, he tells me to put out my hands, then says to back off. What a busy guy.

"I don't need to take advice from a tax-sucking leech who hasn't found a single lead after a week."

"What did you just say, you bastard!"

"Mr. Iwamoto."

Just when I thought he was going to transform into a boiled pig again, he calmed down after being soothed once more. I have to admit, it's somewhat amusing to watch his changing expressions.

"Hmph, well, whatever. Listen, I'll give you a little warning. Even I haven't been able to find a single clue after a week of investigation! How could some lowly detective be of any use? You'd better back off before everyone realizes how incompetent you are. I'm telling you this out of the kindness of my heart!"

"Thanks for the concern. But sorry, detective, I've already found a lead in this case. I'll solve it in less than two days—before you do."

"W-What did you say...!?"

I didn't really need to tell him that much, but for some reason, I just had to say it to this pig.

"Hmph! You're bluffing. I don't have time to waste listening to the nonsense of a foolish detective! My report is done, so I'm leaving!"

"Yes, thank you for your hard work. We look forward to seeing you again."

Maybe because he’s a good person, Baba, the old man, deeply bowed as he saw the pig-man out of the room.

I feel deeply sorry for Yuzuru, whose room was likely rummaged through by that pig.

...No way... he didn’t take that underwear with him, did he?

"My apologies, Lord Kageno. Perhaps it would have been better if you hadn’t met with him?"

"No, it’s fine. At least it helped relieve some stress."

"I’m glad to hear that. Will you be leaving for the day? If you’d like, I can have a car prepared for you."

"Yeah, I won’t be heading back to the office right away, but if you can provide a car, that would be great."

"I’ll have one brought around."

At that moment, Baba changed his tone.

"By the way, Lord Kageno."

"I know. You want to hear about the progress of the investigation, right?"

"Yes, just as you say."

"I can’t say anything optimistic yet... but don’t worry. She’s probably still alive."

"Oh, is that true? That’s wonderful news."

Despite what he said, his expression didn’t change much. Well, he’s not the type to show much emotion to begin with. Maybe this is his version of being happy.

"But don’t tell the old man from Sumibishi yet. We haven’t eliminated the worst possibility."

"Understood. I’ll leave it at that. Please continue your efforts."

"Yeah, see you."

◆

When I stepped outside, the car was already waiting. The person poking her head out from the driver’s seat was the same as this morning—Yuki Kawaguchi.

"I’ve been instructed to take you wherever you’d like. Please, get in."

"Ah, thanks."

The back door opened, and I slid myself into the car.

"Take me somewhere near the downtown area."

"Understood."

It was basically a taxi.

"Detective!"

Just then, I heard a voice from somewhere. There’s no other detective around here but me, so they must be calling for me, right?

"Ah, Lady Yuka is on the second floor."

When I looked in the direction Kawaguchi pointed, sure enough, there was Yuka, smiling and waving her hand enthusiastically.

"Come visit again!"

...It’s not like I can just drop by my ex-girlfriend’s parents’ house whenever I feel like it.

Not knowing what to do, I asked Kawaguchi.

"Do you think I should wave back?"

"That’s not really for me to say..."

Fair enough. For now, I raised my hand lightly out of obligation. Noticing this, Yuka waved her hand even more vigorously.

"...Let’s go."

"Understood."

Once the car started moving, Yuka finally stopped waving.

I wonder if we’ll ever meet again.

◆

"Is this spot all right?"

"Yeah, stop here."

A large intersection in the downtown area. From here, if I head down the alleyway, I'll reach the shot bar "Pearl."

I had the car pull over by the side of the road and quickly got out.

"Please take care of Lady Yuzuru."

"Yeah."

After watching the car drive off to avoid blocking traffic, I made my way into the alley before my body could freeze. Ignoring the "Closed" sign hanging on the door, I opened the plain wooden entrance.

Immediately, I heard the piano version of the *Mrs. Sazae* theme song playing.

"Oh, if it isn't li'l Kageno."

I really wish he'd stop calling me "li'l."

"What's up? Here for a cup of tea? Or maybe... for me?"

"..."

"J-Just kidding, just kidding. Don't glare at me like that. But, you know, I kind of like li'l Kageno's angry face too."

"..."

"...When you make that exasperated face, it kind of hurts my feelings."

"Can we get to the point?"

"Geez, you really don't have a sense of humor. So, what do you need today?"

"I need a favor."

I took out the CD containing the data I'd extracted from Yuzuru's computer and placed it on the counter.

"This contains the emails and address book data left on Yuzuru's computer. From what I can tell, she was probably in contact with the culprit via email. Of course, that data has likely been deleted by now."

"I see. But if it's been deleted, there's no way to check, right?"

"Yeah, it's probably gone from her computer. But the email server she was using should still have logs of who she communicated with, right?"

"Got it. So, you want me to compare the logs of the past month's sent and received emails with the data left on the computer to find what was deleted?"

"Exactly. Can you handle it?"

"Which provider was she using?"

"AOF."

"Huh. That's pretty ordinary for the daughter of a company president. But if it's a big provider like that, there are plenty of people I can get to help. It'll be easy. However, if you want me to check the contents of the emails, that'll be a bit more expensive and take more time. There aren't many employees who can access the actual contents of emails, even with a bribe."

"I'm not asking you to check the contents. As long as I know who she was communicating with, I can handle the rest. I've already got a good idea."

"Got it. I'll look into it."

With that, the bartender disappeared into the back of the shop.

This establishment has its own independent network connected to various businesses and government offices that handle vast amounts of personal information. Especially in this internet-centric age, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they have connections with almost every provider.

No matter how secure a company's system may be, there's no organization that can claim all of its employees are morally upright. Most of the time, employees are more than willing to sell information in exchange for some pocket money.

This shop buys information from such people and sells it to people like us. Not only do we buy information, but we also introduce employees who are looking for some extra cash to the shop and get a referral fee. This has become quite a side income for me, and it seems I have a knack for finding these shady individuals, which is why I've become such a regular at this place.

Not even five minutes later, the master returned with the CD and a single A4 sheet of paper.

"There weren't that many, so it was easy. Here's the result."

He handed me the paper.

On the A4 sheet were three email addresses and three IP addresses—strings of about ten digits each, which essentially serve as internet addresses. The rest of the page was blank, which felt like a waste of space.

"These three are the ones where there's a log of sent or received emails, but the email data has been erased. Want me to look up their physical addresses? Since we have the IPs, that's doable, but it'll cost extra."

"Yeah, just look into this one."

I pointed to one of the three.

I pulled another wad of bills from the envelope in my pocket and handed it to the master.

"Thanks. But are you sure you only want the one? And this domain is..."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's what it is."

"Hmm, I see. I think I've figured out the truth behind this case too."

With that, the master went into the back again. But this time, he returned in less than two minutes.

"Here you go. Since it's nearby and the domain was what it was, it was easy to figure out. This is it."

He handed me another A4 sheet, with only three lines of information about the owner of the address I had specified. Again, a waste of paper.

"You've been a big help. This should do the trick. Well, I'll get out of your hair."

"Oh, leaving already? Well, alright. You seem busy. But next time, come by at night, okay?"

"...I'll come by if you drop that way of talking."

If my hunch was right, this would be enough to solve the case.

◆

I killed some time, waiting until evening before heading to the address written on the paper the master had given me.

It was a unit in an apartment building. Not an old one like my office, but a new, clean apartment that hadn’t been built too long ago. It even had a parking lot.

Now, the question was whether or not they were home. It’s Saturday, and at this time, they should be in...

I stood in front of the entrance to a first-floor unit and pressed the doorbell with the intercom.

"Yes?"

A young man’s voice came through the speaker immediately. It seemed he was already home.

"Are you Mr. Hiroaki Kondo? I’d like to ask you about the disappearance of Miss Yuzuru Sumibishi."

I spoke in my polite, business-like voice.

"I’ve already told the police everything I know."

It seemed he had mistaken me for the police.

"No, I’m a private detective hired by Mitsutomo Corporation. Could I trouble you for a moment to talk?"

"...A detective? ...Please hold on."

Soon, the door opened, and a tall man appeared.

"What can I do for you?"

"You’re Assistant Professor Hiroaki Kondo from Kannan University, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

According to the info I got from *Pearl*, he was 28 years old. Highly educated, tall, and good-looking. Being an assistant professor at a prestigious university at the age of 28, he must be exceptionally smart. I doubt his income is anything to scoff at either.

Now, let’s see how he reacts...

I cleared my throat, and then, dropping the polite tone, I spoke in my usual manner.

"How about you bring out Yuzuru Sumibishi, the girl you kidnapped?"

"...!"

Kondo gasped, visibly shaken.

"Your reaction is pretty telling. So, you're the culprit, aren't you?"

"...W-What are you talking about? You barge in here and accuse me of being the culprit. Are you really a detective hired by Mitsutomo Corporation?"

I showed him the business card Baba had given me, and I shoved my own card at him too.

"Not good enough? I can make a call right here if you need more proof."

"...No, that won't be necessary. I'll accept that. But what makes you think I'm the culprit?"

"If you let me inside right now, I could prove it pretty quickly. But I doubt you'll do that."

"...M-My place is a bit of a mess right now."

"Yeah, I figured. Alright, then I'll explain why I know you're the culprit right here. Maybe that'll make you feel a bit more cooperative. You've heard the basic outline of the case, haven't you?"

"Y-Yes, mostly."

"Yuzuru Sumibishi disappeared eight days ago after going to the restroom at the university. Up to this point, we're on the same page, right? But even while she was attending class, she had bodyguards with her at all times. Now, suddenly changing the subject may sound strange, but why do you think someone would need to have bodyguards?"

Kondo shot me a sharp glare, probably irritated by my probing tone.

"...How should I know? What other reason could there be besides protecting that person?"

"Exactly, that's the right answer. Bodyguards are there to protect the person they're assigned to. That's obvious. And, of course, it's also obvious that kidnapping someone who's constantly being guarded is really difficult, right? I spoke with several people at the university, but not a single one reported seeing anything suspicious. And yet, despite being under constant protection, Yuzuru Sumibishi vanished without a trace. What kind of person would have the skills to pull off such a kidnapping?"

"...How would I know?"

"Exactly. So, let's shift the focus a bit.

Earlier, I said that kidnapping someone under guard is extremely difficult. But there's one scenario where it becomes surprisingly easy, even with bodyguards."

"..."

"If the person being guarded *wants* to be kidnapped. In that case, no matter how hard the bodyguards try, they can't stop it.

You following me now?"

"...Go on."

He spoke with a pale face.

"Yuzuru told her bodyguards she was going to the restroom, and in the brief moment she was out of their sight, she disappeared. But it's a prestigious private university, and it's extremely hard for outsiders to get in. According to what I heard from the bodyguards, they lost sight of her for less than fifteen minutes.

There's only one conclusion to draw. Yuzuru Sumibishi planned to be kidnapped from the start."

"..."

Kondo listened in silence. He was trying to maintain a neutral expression, but I could see he was becoming increasingly uneasy.

"And that's not all. I went to Yuzuru's room and checked her computer. The browsing history had been completely wiped clean. The hard drive still had plenty of space, so I can only assume it was deliberately erased. But strangely enough, most of her email data was still intact.

So, I came to this conclusion: it would've been impossible for someone else to break into Yuzuru's room and tamper with her computer. The only one who could have done it was Yuzuru herself. She probably guessed that if she went missing, her computer would be examined. Anyone who uses the internet has pages they don't want others to see. She wanted to erase those logs, to tidy things up before she disappeared.

And that's not all. I even checked her dresser, where she kept her underwear. Now, don't get the wrong idea. I had her sister with me. And what did I find? One set of expensive lingerie was missing.

That’s when I became certain. Yuzuru had planned from the start to be ‘kidnapped.’ Or rather, to be more accurate, it wasn’t a kidnapping—it was an elopement."

"..."

Kondo still didn’t change his expression, but he avoided my gaze and stared intently at the ground.

I continued speaking without pause.

"Now, the question is, who was it that kidnapped her?

The most likely suspect is someone from the university, the only place where Yuzuru had contact with an outside male. If we assume that she intended to be kidnapped, then the following deduction makes sense: First, she tells her bodyguards she’s going to the restroom and slips away from them. After that, she meets up with someone she had prearranged to rendezvous with and leaves with them. However, since it’s her own university, there’s always the possibility she might run into someone she knows. Most likely, Yuzuru hid in a car and left the campus that way. If we make this assumption, then the most reasonable conclusion is that the culprit is someone who knows the layout of the university well and can freely come and go by car—a university staff member.

That’s why I immediately suspected professors like you. And I reasoned that if she had someone she was willing to elope with, they would have at least exchanged emails.

But if such data existed, Yuzuru would’ve erased it right away. Email data is easy to manage. So, I used a little leverage to check the logs at the provider Yuzuru was using. I wanted to find out if there was anyone she had exchanged emails with, even though her computer had no trace of it. And I found three suspects. Among them, there was one email address that confirmed my suspicions.

You know what a domain is, right? It’s the part that comes after the ‘@’ in an email address. The common ones are things like ‘CO.JP’, right? If it’s ‘CO’, it stands for corporation, and if it’s ‘JP’, it means Japan. So, ‘CO.JP’ would be an email address managed by a Japanese company. You’re an assistant professor, so you know that much, don’t you?"

"...And what of it?"

"It’s good you catch on quick. Similarly, universities usually have their own independent domains. As someone who works at a university, you know this, right? University domains have ‘AC’ in them. I found one of those. Yuzuru’s computer had its data erased, but the provider’s logs still showed an email address with an ‘AC’ domain. That’s when I was certain I’d found the culprit. I used my connections to trace that email address to your home address."

"...She's a university student. There's nothing strange about her emailing a professor or the school office."

"Sure, I can't deny the possibility that she just emailed you."

"..."

"Well, that's my deduction. Now, I want to hear from you. I'm not asking anything complicated. Just answer with 'yes' or 'no.' You didn't kidnap Yuzuru Sumibishi... but rather, you eloped, didn't you?"

"...No, I didn't."

The response came quicker than I expected. As I thought, persuading him with just circumstantial evidence was going to be tough.

"Do you have any proof that she's here? From what I've heard, all your reasoning is just speculation, isn't it?"

He was throwing logic at me. It seems he didn't become a university professor for nothing.

"Is that what you think? Well, I guess it makes sense. You're right, everything I've said so far is just my speculation and circumstantial evidence.

But I'll say this much. I found this address using your email address. Sure, it's easy to erase data from a computer, but the data on the server used to send that email isn't so easily erased. All it would take is one search warrant from the police, and they'd be able to read it, no problem. I don't know what the message said, but who knows?"

"...Is that a threat?"

"I don't care how you interpret it.

But more importantly, I'll ask you one last time, for your own sake. Just answer with 'yes' or 'no.'"

"..."

His face was starting to turn pale. One more push should do it.

"Don't forget that Mitsutomo Corporation is backing me. I'm a detective, after all, and if I wanted to, I could stake out this area all day and night. This is the first floor, and if I really wanted to,

sneaking into your apartment wouldn’t be hard. Not that I’d do something like that, of course, but who knows what Mitsutomo Corporation might do if they get serious."

"..."

Kondo remained silent.

Well, if this doesn’t work, I’ll have to use my last resort. Maybe I’ll threaten him with a bunch of lies.

"Looks like you’re not going to talk. Fine, I’ll leave for now, but let me make one thing clear. As you know, Yuzuru Sumibishi is the daughter of the president of Mitsutomo Corporation. According to a detective on the case, a certain criminal organization is making moves to capture her. This is no joke, not something out of a movie. This is a real criminal organization involved in everything from murder to human trafficking and drug smuggling.

In an apartment like this, I doubt the security is anything to count on. So, tell me, are you good in a fight?"

"..."

Still, no response. But his expression was starting to look a bit odd.

"Well, I guess it’s none of your concern. After all, you don’t know anything about Yuzuru Sumibishi, right? Alright then, if you change your mind, my contact details are on the card I gave you. Give me a call before it’s too late."

I turned my back and started walking away slowly.

Please, confess already.

If this doesn’t work, I’ll have no choice but to break in. I’m not a lawyer, so I’m not too worried about using a little force, but I’d rather avoid doing anything that might get the police involved.

One step, two steps, three steps. I was just about to resign myself to breaking in when—

"Wait, please!"

It seemed I had him. I turned back, pretending to be slightly annoyed.

"What is it?"

"...Everything you said is true. Yuzuru is in the apartment right now..."

He said weakly, letting his shoulders slump.

"Is that so. Mind if I come in?"

Kondo nodded silently and opened the door to let me in.

I followed him down the hallway. Though it was an apartment, it seemed to have about two bedrooms and a living room—bigger than my office, at least.

At the end of the hallway was the kitchen. Or rather, it was more of a dining kitchen. It looked like they were in the middle of preparing a meal, with plates set on the table. And standing by the sink was—

It had been half a year since I last saw her. Even though I was only seeing her back, there was no mistaking her. It was Yuzuru, wearing an apron.

It seemed she sensed our presence, because she turned around.

"Hiroaki? You were gone for a while, but how—ah."

She met my eyes, and her expression froze.

It looked like she had grown her hair out a bit since last year. What had been semi-long was now fully long. But other than that, she hadn't changed at all—she was the same Yuzuru as before. The only thing different was the look in her eyes as she stared at me—a mixture of shock and fear.

"Eiji Kageno! What are you doing here!?"

...That's how she greets me? I didn't expect her to call me 'Eiji' like she used to, but she could've said something a little nicer.

"Yuzuru. Listen calmly. This man says he's a detective hired by your father to find you."

"W-What...!"

She covered her mouth in shock.

But then she quickly turned toward me, leaning forward as she spoke.

"Hiroaki isn't to blame! It's all my fault... it's because of my selfishness!"

That's your first line? Weren't we dating? Couldn't you at least say something like, 'It's been a while'? Am I really just a stranger to her now? No, am I worse than that—am I the bad guy now?

"What are you talking about, Yuzuru?" Kondo said, pulling her closer by her shoulders and turning her to face him. "It's not your fault. I'm the one who made that strange suggestion to you. You've done nothing wrong. Your father must be worried, and according to this man, there's a criminal organization targeting you. You came to me once, and that's enough for me. Now, go back to your father."

"No... I don't want to go back! I don't want to return to my father's place!"

"Don't be selfish! It's no use. I'm not confident I can protect you... For your own happiness, you should go back to your father."

... I guess I can't just block my ears to this.

"I don't want to be separated from you, Hiroaki! I don't care what happens to me, I don't need money or anything else, I just want to be by your side! This past week with you has been the happiest time of my life..."

"Oh, Yuzuru! I don't want to be separated from you either..."

"Hiroaki..."

The two of them gazed at each other. This wasn't some joke or act—they were two adults, both over twenty, making their own decisions and taking responsibility for themselves.

Honestly, my job here was done. I could have left them to finish their third-rate melodrama and gone to report back to old man Baba, and that would've been the end of it...

But when the lead actress in the melodrama is your ex-girlfriend... well, it's hard to just walk away.

"But... it's no good, Yuzuru. I'm just a lowly assistant professor. Now that our location has been discovered, we can't escape your father. Please understand..."

"...It's okay. Please, Hiroaki. Let me talk to this detective alone for a moment. I know him, just a little."

"You do? Now that you mention it, it didn't seem like this was your first time meeting... Alright, fine. Do as you like. I'll be in the next room."

Kondo gave me a slight nod before leaving the room.

And thus, Yuzuru and I were finally reunited, just the two of us.

"It’s been a while, Eiji... no, Kageno."

"Yeah, it has."

A proper greeting, at last.

"You were hired by my father to find me, weren’t you?"

"Yeah, that’s right."

"Why?"

"Why...? That’s hard to answer."

"Half a year ago, you abandoned me. Now you’ve come back to ruin my happiness? Why!? What right do you have to do that!?"

"N-No, you’re wrong. You’ve misunderstood. I was just worried about you—"

"That’s a lie! You’re a famous detective. You must have known from the start that this wasn’t a kidnapping, but an elopement! I don’t need your concern!"

... She had hit the mark.

Ever since I searched her room, I had been certain. This wasn’t a kidnapping; it was an elopement.

"B-But Yuzuru. You’re the daughter of a famous CEO in Japan. There are criminal organizations out there who would target you. If they find out you’re in a place like this, you could really get kidnapped!"

"Oh, now you suddenly want to treat me like some rich man’s daughter again? That’s just a story you made up to scare Hiroaki, isn’t it? What criminal organization? What novel did you pull that from!? Have you ever heard of a single case where the daughter of a big company’s CEO got kidnapped in Japan!? A real criminal organization would know that kidnapping for ransom isn’t worth it!"

... Women’s intuition can be frighteningly sharp.

In reality, cases like that do exist, though they’re kept out of the public eye. But saying that here wouldn’t convince her.

"Let me ask you again. Why did you come to me now, Kageno?"

Her voice was chillingly cold.

Honestly, it hurt more than if she had yelled at me.

"...Alright. I'll be honest. I was jealous. Jealous of the guy you ran away with. And I wanted to confirm with my own eyes what kind of man he was."

"The man who dumped me because of my family background is jealous? Ha! Hiroaki is a wonderful person, without you needing to worry! Unlike you, he didn't change his attitude when he found out I was a rich girl! Unlike you, he ran away with me! Yes, unlike you!"

... Her words stabbed into my heart like knives.

It stung. I didn't expect a warm welcome, and I had anticipated her saying something like this. But hearing it in reality was still extremely painful.

Maybe feeling a little guilty seeing me slump over, Yuzuru softened her tone a bit.

"So, what are you going to do now? Are you going to report this to my father? In exchange for a big reward? Well, that's fine. Either way, I'm not leaving Hiroaki. If you plan on reporting to my father, we'll just run away again."

"Do you... love him that much?"

"Yes, I love him."

Yuzuru answered immediately.

"You have no idea how much I was hurt when you broke up with me, do you? I thought I'd never be able to love anyone again. Everyone who finds out about my family treats me like I'm something fragile, or they're only after my father's money. But Hiroaki was the only one who treated me normally. That's more than enough for me."

The knife that had been stabbed into my heart twisted even deeper.

But if I really thought about it, I shouldn't be so shaken by these words. The reason I took this job was for the reward. It wasn't because I wanted to get back together with Yuzuru or anything like that. Definitely not.

Sure, Yuzuru seems happy now. But ten, twenty years from now, who knows? Most couples who elope end up in a terrible place once their initial passion fades.

But it's not my place to explain that. I have no obligation or right to interfere.

There’s nothing more I can do.

"...Fine. Do whatever you want. Out of respect for the fact that we used to date, I won’t report this to anyone. The police are investigating, but the detective in charge seems incompetent. They might find you eventually, but you’ll have some time to prepare. Run away or do whatever you want."

Yuzuru stared at me in surprise, then lowered her eyes.

"...Should I thank you?"

"I won’t be happy to hear thanks from a selfish woman who’s just made me forfeit my reward."

For the first time since reuniting with Yuzuru, I smiled. Well, it was more of a bitter smile than anything else.

"I see. I’m sorry, for being such a selfish woman."

Maybe this is for the best. I honestly don’t know how sincere that Kondo guy really is.

But at least he’s trying to do what I couldn’t—make Yuzuru happy. Now that Yuzuru and I are just strangers, I have no place to meddle.

I couldn’t bear to look at Yuzuru’s face, so I averted my gaze for no real reason.

That’s when I noticed something strange.

Maybe because of everything that had happened, I hadn’t been paying attention.

Why hadn’t I noticed it before?

There was a shadow outside the window.

"Who’s there!?"

Yuzuru flinched at my sudden shout. Ignoring her, I threw open the window.

But I was a moment too late. Whoever it was had already run off before I could see their face.

Given the timing, it was clear that this wasn’t just some random burglar or pervert. I rushed out without even putting on my shoes.

I ran out of the apartment and into the alley. Almost simultaneously, I saw a car speeding away.

I only caught a glimpse of the driver’s face, but it was a young man I didn’t recognize.

But the problem was the license plate I managed to catch a glimpse of.

...This is bad. Let me change the subject for a moment. What is the worst thing for a detective?

A thief? A criminal?

No, none of those. The correct answer is the police. Detectives often get on the bad side of the police. Breaking into houses, wiretapping—it’s all part of the job. And sometimes we step on their toes during investigations, earning their ire. Naturally, they don’t like us.

That’s why, to avoid unnecessary danger, I’ve memorized the license plates of all unmarked police cars, obtained through certain connections.

And one of those plates matched the one on that car just now. In other words, there’s only one possibility. The man who was spying on Yuzuru’s apartment... was a policeman.

Why was a policeman here?

There was only one reason.

When I trudged back to the room, Yuzuru and Kondo were waiting.

"What happened, detective? I heard you suddenly ran out of the room."

"...I've got some bad news. I saw someone lurking outside the room just now. I rushed out to chase them, but... it was a policeman."

"What...!?"

Yuzuru gasped. At this rate, she was probably going to dislike me even more. But I'm just a stranger now, so it doesn't really matter if she hates me more or less.

"The police are already that close!? Why...!"

"Yuzuru. Your father thought you'd been kidnapped and filed a case against an unknown perpetrator. Normally, the police wouldn't investigate a case with no ransom demands as a kidnapping. But this time, the person who filed the case is the CEO of a top-tier company. So, the police are at least making a surface-level move. And... it seems they've been tailing me."

"No way...!"

This was an unexpected turn for me too. That detective, who hadn't made any progress for a week, suddenly managed to track me down? It's hard to believe. It must've been when I ran into him during the day and provoked him by saying, 'I already know who the culprit is.' He probably didn't take it lightly and had his subordinates tail me. Damn it, tailing is supposed to be my specialty, and yet I didn't notice. Was it because I was shaken after figuring out the truth of the case, or was that young detective's tailing technique just that good...?

Either way, it's no use regretting the past.

"S-So!? What's going to happen to us now!?"

"Calm down. That policeman didn't immediately try to barge into this room earlier. Even though there's a man here who could easily be arrested as a kidnapper in the act.

Which means that policeman is probably just a small fry. Right now, he's probably contacting his fellow detectives, and they're likely rushing over here as we speak, trying to steal the credit."

And that detective must be none other than that pig-faced Iwamoto I met earlier.

"Then we have to run right now...! Let's go, Hiroaki!"

Yuzuru grabbed Kondo's arm.

"Hold on, calm down. If the police get serious, there's no way you two can outrun them. They already know your address. They'll crack your car's license plate too. If they set up roadblocks, amateurs like you won't stand a chance."

"B-But! Then what should we do!?"

I didn't answer immediately and pressed my hand against my forehead, deep in thought.

How much time do we have left?

If the police are already on their way, there's not much time left. However, if that's the case, they won't have had enough time to prepare a warrant. It'll be an arrest in the act. In this very room, there's someone who could be considered a kidnap victim and someone who could be considered a suspect—an arrest in the act is certainly possible.

But that detective has been investigating this case for a week now without any results. If that's the case, rather than making a quick arrest and claiming success, he might prefer to take the formal procedure, get a warrant, and say that his long investigation wasn't wasted. If that happens, we'll have a little more time...

No, I can't afford to be so optimistic. I should assume the police will be here in ten minutes. In that case, what can I do...?

Nothing. I can't think of anything.

...There's no other way.

I didn't want to use this option. But I have no choice. Whether this is considered a kidnapping or an elopement, it's a tricky legal judgment.

As much as I hate it, I'm going to have to consult an expert.

"...I know someone who's an expert at handling situations like this. Wait here for a bit, I'm going to make a call."

"An expert?"

Yuzuru looked at me suspiciously.

"What kind of person is this 'expert'?"

I responded with a bitter tone, even to my own ears.

"...A lawyer."

◆

I left the apartment, pulled out my phone, and called a lawyer I knew.

Definitely not a friend. Just an acquaintance.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

"Oh, it's you. It's rare for you to call. What happened? Did you get caught violating the anti-stalking law and thrown in the slammer? If that's the case, I'd be happy to come down to the

station with a camera for a commemorative photo. I'd even defend you if you pay me a 60 dollars advance."

"...That's not it. I need some advice. Just listen."

"Alright. But just so you know, my consultation fee is 30 dollars for thirty minutes. Oh, but since this is over the phone, there's the phone charge too. So, let's say 30 dollars for every three questions. Sound good?"

"...Hey. 30 dollars for just three questions is a rip-off, don't you think?"

"Nah, if you consider the going rates, I'm pretty affordable. So, what are your two remaining questions?"

"..."

Calm down, me. I should've expected this much. Just get to the point.

"Listen up. I've got a bit of a complicated situation here—"

I briefly explained the situation.

I had been hired by a certain VIP to search for his daughter, who he believed had been kidnapped.

But after investigating, I discovered that the daughter hadn't been kidnapped at all. She had run away of her own free will with a man.

And to make matters worse, the police had now found out where the two of them were hiding.

Given the circumstances, it's unlikely that the man could be charged with kidnapping, but there are powerful forces at work behind the scenes. If things continue as they are, the police will soon show up and arrest the man for kidnapping. But I want to help him. There's hardly any time left, but is there anything I can do—?

Of course, I left out the part where the "kidnapped" woman just so happened to be my ex-girlfriend. If that devil ever found out, he'd never stop teasing me about it until I was in my grave.

"I see. I understand the situation. But I don't really get it. You were hired to find the girl, right? So why do you care about this man? If you just report back to your client, your job is done."

Damn. He's rotten to the core, and his personality is the worst, but he's sharp. He figured it out.

"Shut up. Don’t say unnecessary things."

"Hmph, you gave yourself away. So, does this girl have something to do with you? Given the situation... I’d say there’s a good chance she’s a woman you dated in the past. And now you can’t let go of your feelings for her, so you’re reluctantly calling me because you want to help her. Am I wrong?"

"That doesn’t matter! I’m not holding onto anything!"

And then, I realized I’d fallen right into his trap.

"Ha-ha-ha, you fell for such a simple trick. So, you want to do right by your ex, huh? Hahaha, so that’s the story. You? Man, that’s... really pathetic."

Stab.

Damn it, don’t say that with such sympathy. Today’s been a nightmare. My ex tore into me, and now this guy’s calling me "pathetic" on top of everything.

"Don’t make me repeat myself. It doesn’t matter. I don’t have time. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Fine, fine. Since it’s you asking, I’ll do something. But first, I need to confirm one thing."

"What is it?"

The damn lawyer paused for a moment before speaking.

"Are you sure about this?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Think about it. What if this teacher guy is actually a sly bastard, scamming that rich girl for her money? Maybe he’s saying ‘I don’t care about money’ now, but who knows what’ll happen in the future? The law guarantees that heirs inherit money, you know. If your ex ends up crying later, you won’t be able to do anything about it."

"That’s not true. That man is innocent. ...No, it’s true I can’t predict the future, as you said. But for now, he’s innocent, and that’s enough."

Yes, that teacher is innocent, without any guilty conscience. If that weren’t the case, there’s no way he would’ve earned Yuzuru’s affection so completely—she’s always been weirdly sharp about these things.

...No, this isn’t a deduction; it’s more of a wish. I, too, want that man to make Yuzuru happy. I want him to do what I couldn’t. It would be too ridiculous if he ended up in jail for kidnapping.

"Hmph, fine. If you say so, I’ll do as you ask. You’re in luck; it’s not 5 PM yet. The office should still be open."

Five? Sure, it was just past 4:30, but what does that have to do with anything? Is he seriously going to say he can’t work after the office closes at 5? Knowing him, it’s entirely possible.

But worrying about that now won’t help. If he says it matters, then it must. I’ve got no choice but to leave it to him.

"By the way, what about the payment? You know it’s going to cost a bit to hire a lawyer, right?"

"Don’t worry about that. I’ve got some cash. I can give you your 60 dollars."

"Hah, you’re being unusually generous. But I don’t need the money. How could I charge a proper legal fee for a request as messy as this? It's fine, I'll do it for free."

"...That’s helpful, but..."

Instead of being happy, I felt wary. With this guy, nothing is more expensive than something that’s “free.”

"But—"

Here it comes.

"—I’m going to consider this a favor you owe me."

Even over the phone, I could easily imagine the lawyer’s wicked smile.

And I knew this favor would come with a hefty price later.

But... I couldn’t refuse.

Falling apart over a woman probably feels something like this.

◆

...Surprisingly, it wasn’t until 30 minutes later that the police arrived at Hiroaki Kondo’s apartment.

The doorbell rang noisily, over and over.

"Alright, alright, I'm coming."

And the one who opened the door—was me.

Standing outside the entrance was, as expected, the pig-like detective Iwamoto, whom I'd met earlier in the day. Behind him were a few more detectives and uniformed officers.

"Hmph, long time no see, lousy detective."

"...What do you want?"

Iwamoto pulled a piece of paper from his jacket and thrust it at me.

"There's a warrant out for the arrest of the man who lives here. You know who I'm talking about—Hiroaki Kondo."

"Oh?"

So they went through the proper procedure. But how did they manage to gather enough evidence to request a warrant? Well, even if he's a pig, maybe he's done at least some groundwork over the past week? Or maybe the judge who approved the warrant is in his pocket... That wouldn't be too far-fetched, which is scary.

"Where is he? In the back?"

"No, he's not here right now."

"Hmph, don't try to lie. Fine, I'll just search the place. Oh, and I don't need your permission, since this isn't your room."

With that, the group of detectives pushed past me and stomped into the apartment.

But the person waiting for them in the dining room wasn't Hiroaki Kondo.

Instead, it was a young man with a sharp, unfriendly look, sitting cross-legged in a chair with an insolent attitude.

"...Who the hell are you?"

The sharp-eyed man curled his lip into a mocking smile and said,

"Such language right off the bat? You've got no manners. Who the heck are you? Well, I won't remember a background character like you, but I'll give you a chance to introduce yourself."

"N-Nnnnnnggh...!"

Iwamoto turned bright red and pulled out his police ID.

"Are you mocking an officer of the law? Do you not see this? I'm a detective!"

"Hah, so what if you're a detective? You're the one who should show some respect. Do you not see this badge on my collar?"

Only then did Iwamoto notice the badge the man was wearing.

It was gold, with scales engraved on it.

"Y-You! You're a lawyer, aren't you!?"

"Yeah, that's right, I'm a lawyer. Now that you know, you'd better change your tone and use some respect."

"Hmph! You think I'm afraid of a badge like that? As if I could be a detective if I were scared of lawyers!"

...It suddenly occurred to me that these two might actually be quite alike in personality.

"Enough! I don't care who you are. Where is Hiroaki Kondo? I'm arresting him for kidnapping!"

"Kondo isn't here. Too bad for you. Now, get out of here before I charge you with trespassing."

"Hmph! Are you the owner of this apartment? You're not, are you? In that case, you can't charge me with trespassing! I'm searching the place to find the suspect's whereabouts, and that's perfectly legal!"

"You're the one who's misunderstanding things. Unfortunately for you, I'm Hiroaki Kondo's legal representative. I have a duty to protect all of my client's rights. That means I can also order you thieves who entered without a warrant to leave. If you refuse, I'll have you charged with unlawful entry."

"Grgh!? What did you say? You're his lawyer...!"

Iwamoto visibly faltered for a moment. But in typical fashion, his nerves quickly recovered, and he straightened up.

"W-Well, fine. If there's a lawyer here, that actually works out. Now, lawyer, if you don't want to be arrested, be honest with me. There's a warrant out for Hiroaki Kondo for kidnapping. Since you're his representative, you should know where he is. It's in your best interest to tell me now. If you cover for him, I'll arrest you for obstruction of justice. And this isn't a threat!"

"I do know where Hiroaki Kondo is. But I'm not obligated to tell you."

"Oh?"

Iwamoto licked his lips, like a pig that had found its prey.

"It's a crime to protect someone with a warrant out for their arrest, even if you're their lawyer. Fine, I'll just take you down to the station for now."

"I refuse. Even if you show me a warrant, it's meaningless without legitimate grounds for the arrest."

"Hah! What nonsense are you spouting! It's clear that Hiroaki Kondo kidnapped Yuzuru Sumibishi and kept her trapped here! Her family even filed a formal complaint! No grounds, you say? What a joke! Let's hear your 'grounds for no grounds' then! Well? You can't answer, can you?"

"Hmph, I have nothing to explain. I'll just show you. Show you proof that there are no grounds."

And then, right on cue, the door opened, and two people walked in.

"Lawyer! We made it in time!"

It was Hiroaki Kondo and Yuzuru Kondo.

In their hands was a single piece of paper.

Phew. It looks like this is finally going to be resolved. I could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

And at that moment, Iwamoto finally realized that the people who had entered were the very ones he had a warrant for.

"Ah! Y-You're Hiroaki Kondo! Finally, I've found you! You're under arrest!"

"Sorry, but I'm going to have to refuse that."

It was the lawyer who answered.

Before Iwamoto could say anything else, the lawyer snatched the paper from Kondo and Yuzuru’s hands and shoved it in Iwamoto’s face.

"W-What is this?"

"Take a look. It’s a marriage certificate."

"A marriage certificate!? Hah, so what? That doesn’t change the fact that she was kidnapped!"

"Before you say that, maybe you should brush up on the law. You’re a detective, right? So you should know the Japanese criminal code on 'Abduction and Kidnapping,' right?"

"I know that much! Article 225 of the Penal Code: Anyone who abducts or kidnaps a person for profit, indecency, or marriage purposes shall be punished with imprisonment for not less than one year and not more than ten years!"

"As expected of a detective, you know your stuff. But what about Article 229 of the Penal Code? Do you know that one?"

"Of course I do! In cases of kidnapping, unless it’s for profit, the prosecutor cannot file charges without a formal complaint from the victim or someone legally authorized to do so. But in this case, the father has already filed a formal complaint! There’s no problem at all!"

"Hey, detective. That’s not all there is to it, is it? Have you forgotten that Article 229 has more to it?"

"Hmph, more? There’s nothing—nothing—nothing... No, no... aaaaaah!?"

Iwamoto’s face stiffened as if he’d bitten down on aluminum foil with his molars.

"N-No way!"

"Looks like you’ve remembered. Yes, the rest of Article 229 goes like this: 'If the kidnapped person marries the perpetrator, the complaint becomes invalid unless a court has ruled the marriage null or void.'"

"Nh-w-whaaaaaaaat!?"

Iwamoto’s jaw quivered as he turned to the younger detective beside him.

"H-Hey, is what he just said true?"

"Y-Yes, I definitely recall seeing that clause as well... This is bad. As things stand, we don’t have any grounds to arrest him... We should probably consult the prosecutor right away."

Seeing this, the lawyer puffed up his chest and smirked triumphantly.

"Ha-ha-ha, you get it now, don't you, detective? Well, since you understand, why don't you go consult with the prosecutor and get out of here?"

"D-Damn it! Listen, this isn't a retreat, it's a temporary withdrawal! I'll prove that this marriage is invalid and arrest him soon enough!"

Spitting those words out, Iwamoto stormed out of the house, leading the police officers with him.

As the police left, the lawyer shot them a snide grin, then turned back to the newlywed couple.

"Well then, that's the end of my job. Given the circumstances, it's not impossible that the marriage could be declared invalid like that detective said. But from here on, it's your problem. You should return to your parents' home immediately and convince them. If the complaint to the police is withdrawn, everything will be resolved."

And so, that was the end of this case.

...It kind of leaves me without much of a role, though.

◆

Postscript.

Afterward, Hiroaki Kondo and Yuzuru Sumibishi—no, I should say, Mr. and Mrs. Kondo—visited Yuzuru's father, Hideo Sumibishi. They went to report what had happened.

I can only imagine the drama that unfolded.

A father strongly opposed. A daughter and her husband refusing to back down.

But the only thing I know for sure is the outcome: their marriage was accepted.

My work was officially deemed complete, and I received a success fee of seven thousand dollars. I returned to my lazy routine of three meals and naps a day. I could probably live comfortably for a while without working, and frankly, I don't feel like doing anything for a while anyway.

What exactly did I accomplish in this case?

When I stopped to think about it, I couldn't help but feel a bit foolish.

Yuzuru hadn’t been kidnapped at all; she’d run away with a man.

And I had gone so far as to help arrange her marriage to a guy who, under different circumstances, might have been my rival in love. And to top it all off, the last bit of glory was stolen by that wicked lawyer. When I look back on the whole case, it just feels utterly pointless.

There’s one more postscript that delivered the final blow to my dwindling morale.

Some time after the case was closed, I received a postcard.

It was an invitation to a wedding.

An invitation to the wedding of my ex-girlfriend. That alone was quite damaging, but on top of the usual formal text, there was an additional note written personally by Yuzuru.

'This time, we’re having a proper ceremony. We’re paying for it ourselves, without relying on my father. I really hope you can make it, Kageno. But since we’re using up all our money for the wedding, I hope you can give us a generous gift as well!'

...Don’t you have any mercy?

(Hard-luck, Hard-boiled, Heartbroken Days of Kageno -- End)

Afterword

How did you enjoy the third volume of the *Tactical Judgment* short story collection?

This time, as usual—I think it's more or less the same, but for the newly written piece, I decided to switch things up a bit and made Kageno the protagonist. It's a story about how the cynical detective got caught in the trap of a con artist, but I hope you enjoyed it even a little.

Now then. Time flies, and we're already on the third short story collection, making this the eleventh book in the *Tactical* series. By the time you get to an eleventh book, it's hard to come up with new patterns for the afterword, and I'm honestly at a bit of a loss.

That said, I'd feel guilty if I just ended this with a "See you next volume~," so I'd like to take this opportunity to offer a bit of an excuse—or rather, an explanation—about something I wanted to clarify.

First of all, the short stories in this collection were originally published in the special issues of *Dragon Magazine* called *Battle Royale*. *Battle Royale* is a quarterly publication, released every three months—spring, summer, fall, and winter.

Now, there's one feature that all the short stories published in *Battle Royale* share. That is: the editorial team assigns a theme, and we try our best to write short stories that follow that theme.

For example, if the *Battle Royale* issue is published around spring, the theme might be "new beginnings." For winter, it might be "snow." The themes generally align with the season in which the issue is released.

Of course, the *Tactical Judgment* short stories also try to follow those themes, but when those stories are compiled into a single book—

I think some readers of this *Tactical SS* series, including this volume, may have noticed that the seasons in each short story sometimes jump from fall to spring.

However, this doesn't mean that "half a year has passed in the blink of an eye," so please don't worry too much about that.

And—this is the most important thing—there's a chance that someone might bring up the fact that "lawyer training is supposed to be from August to November, right?" But as the author, I kindly ask that you not sweat the small details and just walk the path of life with a broader perspective. Yes, indeed.

By the way, here's a bit of a trivial fact: the concept for the third short story in this collection, *The Unreasonable Days of a Certain Communist*, was "festival."

I thought I incorporated that concept into the last sentence of the story, but neither my editor nor the chief editor seemed to notice at all. Well, that's how it goes sometimes.

Now, it seems there isn't much space left for this afterword, so I'm running out of lines. With that being the case, let me finish with the usual promotional announcement.

Some of you may already know this from the official Fujimi Mystery Bunko website, but I'm currently in the middle of writing a new work, slated for release around summer—or at least, I was supposed to be…

After spending about a month writing a few pages of something that felt like a mystery, both my editor S and I completely agreed that it was a total miss, and we scrapped it. Wow, writing mysteries is hard.

So now, I'm working on something completely different from my previous works, but of course, there's always the possibility it'll end up shelved as well. (Especially since the deadline is fast approaching…!!)

So, to all my readers, if we're able to meet again in the summer… it would feel like a real, miraculous blessing. Until then.

Toru Shiwasu

P.S.:

Regarding the last short story in this collection, *The Unfortunate Days of Kageno*, I based the final punchline on an anecdote shared with me by Mr. Tashiro, the author of the *Hirai Gaikotsu* and *Kirisaki* series.

I'd like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Tashiro for providing me with such a self-deprecating story. Better luck next time!

師走トオル

しわすとおる●埼玉県在住。『タクティカル・ジャッジメント』で第2回富士見ヤングミステリー大賞準入選に選ばれる。同作にて作家デビュー。その後、新シリーズ『がらくたのフロンティア』を発表。ゲームと名のつくものなら、なんでも大好き。得意なこと・おやじギャグ。弱点・スギ花粉。

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